

© Not Set in Stone: Finding Information About American Synagogues

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Jewish Studies website

<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/index.html>

**Description:** In large cities there are Judaica libraries, museums, archives, and genealogical societies that enable centralized searching about congregations and their buildings. Jewish histories of cities like New York and Chicago, although in many instances outdated, provide names of congregations, their locations, and denominations. For smaller cities and towns, the WPA guides, especially the unpublished records of the surveys done by historians hired for these projects, are wonderful. Index cards with the original data can be found in state or regional institutions. Telephone and city directories enable the researcher to trace the peregrinations of the “wandering” Jewish institutions, including those no longer extant. Large scholarly archives like the American Jewish Archives and the American Jewish Historical Society are familiar to us, but local collections also have useful material. Synagogues themselves are not always a rich resource because many have discarded materials as they moved from building to building, but anniversary albums always have histories of the congregation and pictures of their successive homes. The presentation will provide a general description of archives, libraries, and private collections, plus recommendations on taking and storing slides.

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Vast treasures are waiting to be discovered

by the scholar of American Jewish history, but

finding primary sources requires patience and the

willingness to pursue frequently unproductive lines of inquiry. The most comprehensive

collections of Jewish material are at the New York Public Library’s Dorot Jewish

Collection, <http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/jws/jewish.html>; Harvard University,

<http://128.103.60.91/F/PVNQ5VVXRGPIC9R2VUT5986U2PI64IDAK6AIGUA5CR1X>

[5FHXLA-50552?func=file&file\\_name=find-b&local\\_base=pub](http://5FHXLA-50552?func=file&file_name=find-b&local_base=pub); Yale University,

<http://orbis.library.yale.edu/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>; and the

Library of Congress: <http://catalog.loc.gov/>.

## Primary resources

Some of the most basic tools, however, like a complete list of American Jewish newspapers, does not exist. The New York Public Library has a list of its microfilm collection of Jewish newspapers in all languages in a pdf file at <http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/jws/documents/microfilmsnorthamerica.pdf> but they do not have in the collection every volume or issue of every newspaper. Because newspapers are of local interest, they are most likely to be found close to their place of publication. A good strategy on First Search/WorldCat is to use the “serials” limit in the advanced search mode. For keywords use “jewish” “newspaper” and then “state name.” The internet makes it easier to find information and to locate newspapers in paper or microfilm copies, but any claim to total inclusiveness is hard to ensure, which is why I do not believe that every paper will be on the list of newspapers and their dates that I am preparing for my website, although there is already other useful material:

<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/index.html>

For a number of reasons, recent synagogue history is more readily documented than data from before 1900. The Jewish population of the United States was small before the major migrations of the period between the 1880 to 1924. Secondly, the first generation—Germans in the 1860s–1880s, and central and East Europeans in the following decades—were more concerned with establishing themselves, their businesses and synagogues than in preserving history. Finally, American libraries and archives were founded only after some philanthropic Jews became conscious of the need to preserve the history of the Jews in America at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Historic preservation—not in the architectural sense but in keeping written records—requires space, stability, and volunteers.<sup>2</sup> Reform temples had the most of both and therefore are the easiest to chronicle; Conservative synagogues gained space in the 1920s, and they, too, are likely to have material. Orthodox synagogues, the least wealthy, and the smallest—often meeting in storefront *shuls*—discarded their records as activities of a higher priority took over their office and library space.<sup>3</sup>

One useful tool for local history in the period of the 1930s and 1940s is the careful and professional work done by the Federal Writers Project [FWP] of the Works Progress Administration [WPA], created in 1935. Historians amassed huge amounts of data for each of the 48 states, archiving it in repositories such as state museums and libraries, historical societies, and university archives. In this electronic age, the best tool for locating WPA files is ArchivesUSA which permits searching by keyword, collection name, repository name, or location.<sup>4</sup> A partial list of repositories of the WPA information is at:

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/American\\_Jewish\\_Historical\\_Societies.pdf](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/American_Jewish_Historical_Societies.pdf)

Print, however, has not been entirely superseded. The FWP material was used to produce a guidebook for each state, originally called the *Federal Writers' Project Guide*, and reprinted as the *American Guide Series*. There is also a bibliography of books on American synagogues at:

<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/synagogues.pdf>

Synagogues and temples are the central institution of American Jewish life, and studying them requires access to minutes, anniversary books, memorabilia, files, and oral

histories. Amassing a list of synagogues in a large city, or even in a state with a small Jewish population, is preliminary to finding out what primary materials exist and whether they can be accessed at a distance. A very incomplete list of synagogue archives is at <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/synagogues.pdf>

City directories are essential for the task of identifying and tracking congregations, and they are available on microfilm or paper (of course, the earlier the publication date, the more brittle the paper). They are difficult to use because, even for a single city, their titles change over time. From 1874 to 1917 *The Lakeside Annual Directory* was the name of Chicago's compilation but it was *Polk's City Directory* in 1928/29. City directories are essential for tracing the moves of congregations, kosher butchers and bakeries, individual families, and synagogues, which relocate at a very rapid pace. Most early directories list not only individuals' home addresses but also jobs, so members' moves give a snapshot of upward mobility, both geographical and occupational. Chicago is one of the most heavily documented city; there is a book that lists every synagogue and all their known addresses.<sup>5</sup>

National and regional Jewish and ethnic archives are reservoirs of primary data, much of it predating the age of electronic databases and therefore requiring travel to New York, Cincinnati, or Chicago.<sup>6</sup> Such trips prove very productive, not only because of the quality of the information, but because of the knowledge of the archivist. Some of the material—perhaps most—will have been cataloged by a professional archivist, and she/he is likely to know the whereabouts of even the uncataloged collections.

A number of states and states with large Jewish populations have historical societies or museums. The American Jewish Historical Society has a searchable list on

their website: <http://www.ajhs.org/academic/other.cfm> It includes Canadian and other international organizations, as well. There is somewhat longer list with links in a pdf file:

<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/synagogues.pdf>

(Additions to this file would be most welcome, and the same pertains to any other aspects of synagogue history, architecture, sociology, clergy or lay leadership.) Museums and archives of immigration and regional history, like the Balch Institute of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: <http://www.hsp.org/> and the National Museum of American Jewish History: <http://www.nmajh.org/> are also repositories worth investigating.

Ultimately synagogue history is local, which means that much can be accomplished at a distance—but not everything. An approach that has proven successful is to survey institutions in advance to determine whether a visit would be productive.<sup>7</sup> Synagogues keep records of their milestones like proud parents keep a baby book—pictures of founders, anniversary programs, mortgage burning ceremonies, and, in some instances, minutes of meetings of the synagogue board, the affiliated organizations like sisterhood and mens' clubs, and building committees. Is there enough to warrant a visit? If the city of interest has a local Jewish archive, or if one temple/synagogue serves as the repository for several, travel is a compelling prospect.

### **Reading synagogues**

Synagogue architecture can be “read” as a text that reveals the congregation’s aspirations and choice of models. Since synagogues need not be in any particularly style, the *balabatim* [leaders] decide what image they wish to project. There are precedents for almost everything—from cathedrals to Romanesque chapels to the modernism of the

International Style. An attractive building with different spaces for various activities brings new members, and many a temple has been cited in the architectural press for its impressive design. The cost of membership increases with a new building but growth in membership ameliorates the per family share.

Before turning to images of a few selected synagogues, I want to share what I learned from my own research.<sup>8</sup> There are two invariant principles in building new synagogues and temples. Initially they will be too large because of the expectation of congregational growth. Jews commission buildings the way parents purchase children's shoes; the toddler always outgrows his/her shoes but most large (and lavish) buildings become obsolete because the epicenter of the Jewish community has moved. Secondly, the dreamers ignore the lesson of history. Mobility, both geographic and socio-economic, is the leitmotif of 350 years of Jewish success in the United States and yet, when the building committee sits down with the architects, it is as though this home will serve for a century. Very few last more than two generations, and even when the population is stable, costs of heating and cooling may increase so drastically as to require a new and much smaller addition to accommodate the reality of minimal attendance at everything except the occasional *bat/ bat mitzvah*, wedding, and the annual High Holyday services.

### **Michigan: a Big City and a Small Town**

Detroit is a case study of Jewish migrations from the founding of its first congregation, Beth El, (1850) that had initially met in people's homes.<sup>9</sup> Its first building was a converted church in the first zone of settlement, i.e. near the river that gave rise to

the city. Congregations multiplied as schisms separated the less from the more traditional, the wealthier from the less wealthy.

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/Map\\_Detroit\\_1.html](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/Map_Detroit_1.html)

This map shows the genesis of Jewish Detroit at its creation. It began at the south end of Woodward Avenue, the city's spine, near the river that made the city economically viable. Jewish Detroit remained compact until the expansion of the automotive industry. Although few Jews worked in manufacturing, they benefited from it as shopkeepers and scrap metal dealers.

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/Map\\_Detroit\\_3.html](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/Map_Detroit_3.html)

After the turn of the century synagogues, *shuls*, and temples proliferated but Jews remained concentrated west of Woodward Avenue. In 1922, Beth El moved north on Woodward and commissioned a leading Jewish architect, Albert Kahn, who had made his reputation designing automobile factories for the Ford Motor Company, to build their building. It was a replica of the Lincoln Memorial, thereby leaving no doubt about Jewish patriotism.<sup>10</sup>

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/temple\\_beth\\_el.html](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/temple_beth_el.html)

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/temple\\_beth\\_el\\_sanctuary.html](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/temple_beth_el_sanctuary.html)

The paradigmatic nineteenth century success story was the Jewish peddler turned department store owner in small towns and cities at great distances from concentrations of their co-religionists (a term that was much favored in the nineteenth century). Jacob

Kahn came from Germany to Hancock, Michigan, building a business and a temple, naming it Temple Jacob. With a bow to the rich veins of copper in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, it was crowned with a copper dome.

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/synagogues\\_photographs.html](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/synagogues_photographs.html)

In its history is the record of Jewish life in America; from department store owning, to doctoring/practicing law/accounting/university teaching; and emigration from towns and small cities to large ones. After WWII, there was an exodus from the upper midwest to California, Arizona, and Florida. Snow begins to fall the area Copper Harbor area in October, and winter storms in late April are not unusual. Congregational life remains viable in Houghton/Hancock because of two factors: one is the availability of visiting rabbinical students from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati to conduct High Holyday services; the other is its proximity to Michigan Technical University which has some Jewish faculty and students.

### **Urban Centers**

Chicagoans turned to firms from outside the city, seemingly preferring distant designers and historic styles as early as the 1920s. Temple Sholom, a wealthy Reform congregation, engaged Coolidge & of Hodgson of Boston to build a Romanesque structure on a prime piece of real estate and was able to complete it—with only a few minor modifications—during the depression year of 1930. Temple Sholom is still the religious building on Lake Shore Drive, and one of the few to have a professionally written history.<sup>11</sup>

<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/Sholom.html>

## **Detroit Jews Move North**

<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/WWII.html>

The post-WWII decade saw Detroit's Jews moving to the northern boundary of the city from which they would become suburbanites. Building budgets provided funding for huge "cathedrals" that proclaimed the material success of their members. These campus complexes with large school buildings were family centered, and their huge parking lots underscored the central role played by the automobile in suburban life.

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/Beth\\_El\\_int\\_Sanctuary.html](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/Beth_El_int_Sanctuary.html)

Congregation Beth El left the city in 1973 and sold the Kahn-designed building to an African-American church, which was the pattern common to every city. In neighborhoods vacated by whites—sometimes in panic, and often encouraged by unscrupulous realtors—blacks moved into the area. Synagogues needed little modification to become churches and many of them survived because of it.

Beth El relocated in the northwest suburb of Bloomfield Hills where Minoru Yamasaki gave its new building the added cachet of having been designed by a world renowned architect. Possessed of the necessary resources—space and volunteers, Beth El maintains the Rabbi Leo M. Franklin Archive, a repository of material on Michigan Jewry: <http://tbeonline.org/Rfranklinarchive1/index.htm>

North Shore Congregation Israel (Reform) in Glencoe, Illinois purchased an impressive site on the shore of Lake Michigan in the far northern and very wealthy suburb of Glencoe. They, too, had Yamasaki to build a monumental synagogue a decade before Beth El.

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/n\\_shore.html](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/n_shore.html)

Numbering among its members some of Chicago wealthiest families made possible a lavish budget and a distinctive building. Views from the sanctuary windows provided a beautiful view of the lake; there is a large social hall and school building. In 1964, it seemed to be built for the ages, but the imposing sanctuary became a liability in the early 1970s when the price of crude oil skyrocketed. It is the ultimate Jewish cathedral, but it fell victim to the high costs of cooling and heating.

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/N\\_Shore\\_int.html](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/N_Shore_int.html)

Thomas Beeby, Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago added a chapel that seats 275, which serves the congregation for most purposes.

## **Conclusion**

As American Jews celebrate 350 years of settlement in the United States, the community can trace its history/histories by delving into libraries and archives, and by studying synagogues and temples and the communities that built them. The exodus continues, as Jews move from the east coast and the Midwest to the Sun Belt. Some migrations, however, have ended—people left small towns (except college towns) for urban centers where Jewish life was easier, especially in the time of endogamous marriage. None remain in the occupations that their grandfathers pursued—tailoring or scrap dealing and certainly none are peddlers; but they continue to affiliate, support, and establish congregations. And the history of those places, and the people who were

associated with them, provides a lens through which to view the history of American Jewry.

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<sup>1</sup> American Jewish Historical Society: <http://www.ajhs.org/research/Archives.cfm> was founded in New York City on June 7, 1892. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. vol. 2, p. 826-7. American Jewish Archives: <http://www.americanjewisharchives.org/aja/index.html> was founded in Cincinnati in 1947.

The Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library was founded in New York City in 1897 “with funding contributed by Jacob Schiff.

<http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/jws/history.html>

<sup>2</sup> “Creating the Synagogue Archive” is a useful primer for volunteer archivists:

<http://www.americanjewisharchives.org/aja/syna/index.html>

Proffitt, Kevin, *Starting from Scratch: Creating the Synagogue Archives*. Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> The Klau Library and the American Jewish Archives are located at reform seminary’s Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati:

<http://www.huc.edu/libraries/cincy/><http://www.americanjewisharchives.org/aja/index.htm>

The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City is less strong on local histories:

<http://www.jtsa.edu/library/about/>

There is no analog for Orthodox seminaries or synagogue organizations. The closest is the Library and Special Collections of Yeshiva University:

<http://www.yu.edu/libraries/>

<sup>4</sup> *ArchivesUSA* is a proprietary database of the Chadwyck-Healey Co. and may only be used by institutions who hold a site license.

<sup>5</sup> *Synagogues of Chicago*, ed. by Irving Cutler et al. Chicago: Chicago Jewish Historical Society, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Synagogues occasionally refuse access to their minutes, even after the people whose names are mentioned are long deceased. In this regard, they are more secretive than the United States census, which releases data after 70 years. But one can circumvent this if the denominational has collected congregational minutes.

<sup>7</sup> Sample survey of the state of Michigan:

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/elstein\\_pg581.jpg](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/elstein_pg581.jpg) 5 pg.

Synagogue archives:

[http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/American\\_Synagogue\\_Archives.pdf](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/collections/jewishstudies/American_Synagogue_Archives.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Rochelle Berger Elstein, “Synagogue Architecture in Michigan and the Midwest, 1865-1945.” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1986).

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<sup>9</sup> Irving I Katz, *The Beth El story with a History of the Jews in Michigan Before 1850*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1955).

<sup>10</sup> Kahn spent time with Henry Bacon, architect of the Lincoln Memorial, when both traveled through Europe on fellowships. Kahn won the \$500 prize from the most important journal of the day, *American Architect and Building News*; he also was the only applicant in 1890. Grant Hildebrand, *Designing for Industry* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974): 9.

<sup>11</sup> Elliot Lefkovitz, *Temple Sholom: 125 Years of Living Judaism, 1867-1922*. (Chicago, 1993).