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*Tudo se ilumina
para aquelle que
busca a luz.*

*All is illuminated
for those who
seek the light.*

- Avram Ben Kosh -

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The Synagogue of St. Thomas, located in Charlotte Amalie on the island of St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands and called Beracha Veshalom Vegemiluth Hasadim (Blessing and Peace and Acts of Piety), was built in 1833. It is the second-oldest synagogue and Jewish religious structure in continuous use in the United States. The congregation founded there in 1796 was composed of Sephardic Jews who came to the Caribbean with the Dutch to facilitate trade between Europe and the New World.

THE ST. THOMAS SYNAGOGUE

BY MARK R. BARNES, PH.D.

HISTORY

In the mid-1990s, as part of a technical assistance effort by the Southeast Regional Office of the National Park Service, in Atlanta Georgia, I was directed to work with the US Virgin Islands State Preservation Office to increase the number of National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) in that area. One of the cultural properties recommended for consideration as a NHL by the state office was the St. Thomas Synagogue. Upon the completion of the study the Secretary of the Interior designated the synagogue as a National Historic Landmark on September 25, 1997.

According to various academic sources, the 1833 Jewish Synagogue and Congregation of St. Thomas may logically trace its roots over some 2,000 years of the Hebrew Diaspora, starting with the destruction of the Jewish nation and the Great Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in the first

century A.D. Some of the displaced Hebrew peoples ended up in the Iberian Peninsula, where over some 1,500 years under Roman, Visigoth, Muslim, and Christian rulers they worshiped in their synagogues, attended to their businesses, and raised their families

according to religious tenets that over time came to identify them as Sephardic (Spanish and Portuguese) Jewish peoples.

Sephardic congregations in Christian towns could usually count on the protection of local rulers who derived both financial and administrative benefit from their Jewish subjects. However, in the latter part of the 14th century, the religious fervor the Castilian kings used in their war of liberation, or *Reconquista*, of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims, also became directed at Jews. The general intent was to forcibly convert the Jews to Christianity, which affected tens of thousands of Jews living in the Christian controlled areas of Spain. Records indicate most Jews at this time either left the urban centers of Spain for rural towns or elected to become "New Christians," or *conversos*.

In 1469, the union by marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile concentrated the full military might of a united Spain to complete the *Reconquista* in 1492. To pursue the religious front of this effort, the Spanish Inquisition was

created by papal bull in 1478 at the request of the Spanish rulers, with the Inquisition beginning its activities in 1480 under Tomas Torquemada the first Inquisitor-General.

The Inquisition's job was to pressure Jews to convert and



St. Thomas Synagogue main sanctuary.



to ensure that *conversos* did not backslide to their original faith. During this time, Judaism literally moved underground as basements of houses became synagogues. Rabbi B. Boxman of the St. Thomas Synagogue, confirmed that, "According to Sephardic tradition, some synagogues, like theirs, covered their floors with sand to remember this time when Jews also used sand to muffle the sounds of congregations practicing their faith."

On March 31, 1492, the Spanish rulers issued a decree for the expulsion of all unconverted Jews from their realm. Jews were given three months to settle their affairs and depart Spain or become *conversos*. It is estimated half of Spain's Jews "converted," with the rest leaving for nearby Portugal, while smaller numbers took boats to southern France, Italy, and areas of the Ottoman Empire where they sought refuge among Jewish communities. Later, in 1496, a Jewish expulsion decree was generated by Portugal and the recently resettled Spanish Jews were again on the move, this time with their Portuguese cousins.

Under the Spanish expulsion decree, the prohibition on Judaism was rigorously enforced in Spain, the Balearic Islands, Sicily, and Sardinia, but appears to have been less so in Spanish overseas territories in North Africa, Naples, Milan, the Spanish Netherlands (Holland), and the New World for the displaced *conversos*. The Portuguese permitted *conversos* to immigrate to their colonies in India, Brazil, and the Atlantic Islands.

It seems ironic that the emigration inflicted on Sephardic Jews became a source of strength. The majority of the Jewish people made their living as small traders, farmers, shopkeepers, and money lenders. These were the very trades and crafts most needed as European countries entered the Age of Exploration and established colonies in faraway parts of the globe previously unknown to them in 1492.

In the 16th century Sephardic Jews in the Netherlands financed trade in northern European goods, such as iron, wood, grain, and cloth, for southern European and colonial goods, such as wool, rock salt, sugar, spices, tobacco, coffee, and cocoa beans. This trade was founded on connections with *conversos*, often family members, still residing in Spain and Portugal and the colonies in the New World, Africa, and the Far East. Many trade ships were captained by *conversos*. By the

As Sephardic Jews managed most of the trade in New World products passing through Holland, it was natural they would play an important role as the Dutch empire expanded. When the Dutch seized the northern coast of Brazil in the 1630s from the Portuguese, "a large number of Dutch Sephardim emigrated to Brazil, mainly to Recife, and captured a large share in the sugar export business." Innovations in sugar production were introduced by the Dutch and Sephardic



Above, St. Thomas Synagogue; The aron hakodesh or holy ark, containing seven sefer torahs

Right, detail, Ner Tamid (the eternal light), crafted in glass and bronze. Note the brass collar created in the shape of a crown. It symbolizes God's eternal presence and is therefore never extinguished.



1590s, Jewish merchants and traders had made Amsterdam northern Europe's foremost emporium for sugar, spices, and other products from the Iberian colonial empires. In return, the Dutch government allowed Sephardic Jews to build their first synagogue in 1597 and in 1657 all resident Jews were recognized as Dutch nationals.

Jews between 1638 and 1645, making Brazil the largest exporter of sugar. The Portuguese retook this region of Brazil in 1645, again forcing a relocation of Jews, this time to English Barbados. The English, who had settled Barbados in the 1630s, had good relations with the Dutch who were their main supplier of enslaved Africans, and Sephardic Jews would now provide capital for establishing sugar

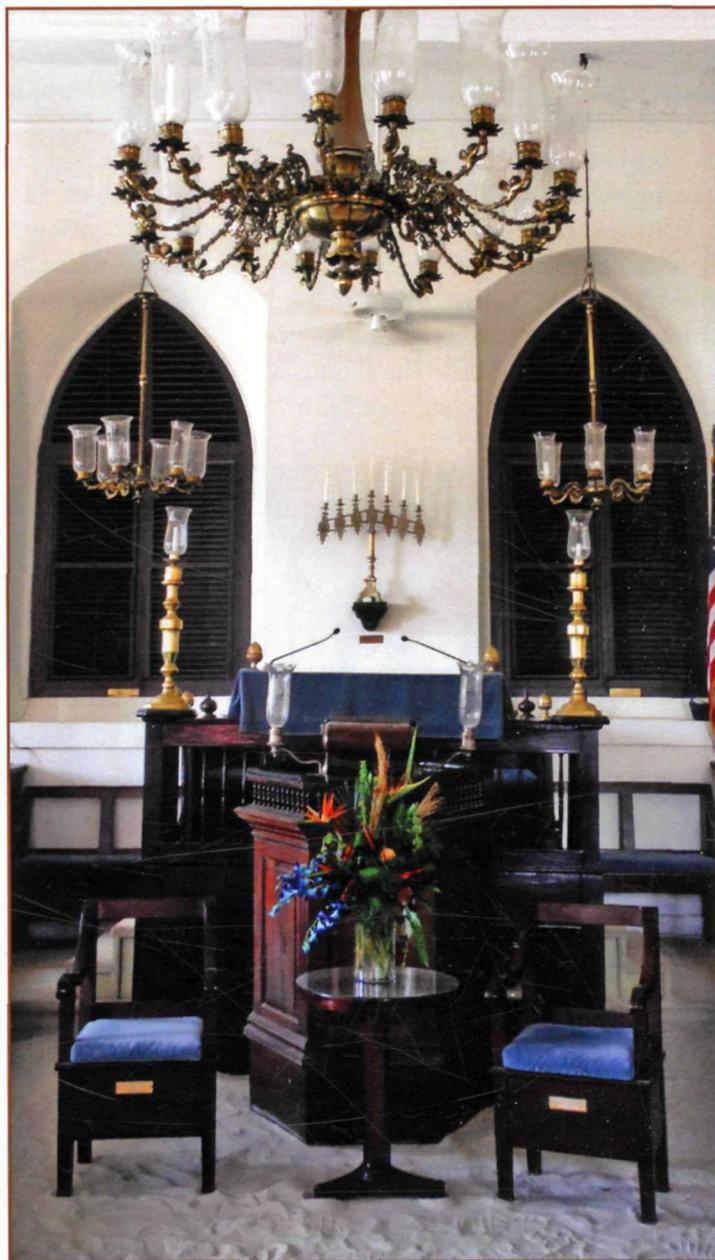
plantations. Thanks to Jewish *émigrés* from Brazil, England was able to drive Portugal out of the northern European trade in sugar, from its own plantations on Barbados, and by the 1650s Sephardic congregations had been established in Dutch Curacao and Surinam, English Barbados, and Jamaica.

In the 1670s, Denmark became the last European country to colonize the smaller islands of the Caribbean. The fourth Governor of the Danish Virgin Islands, Gabriel Milan, was from a Jewish family with trading connections in Portugal, the Netherlands, and Hamburg. To curry the favor of the Danish crown, Milan accepted the Lutheran faith in 1682 to improve his prospects of being employed by the Danish state, though even before his appointment, a few Jewish families had moved to the Danish St. Thomas from other West Indies islands.

Further research showed that when the Danish government acquired St. Croix from France in 1734, Jews originating from Brazil, Portugal, and Spain were among the first to establish sugar plantations there. Christian Oldendorp's history of the Danish West Indies, written in 1777, noted, "...a considerable number of Jews, particularly in St. Croix" and that "the Jews have no regular synagogue, but rather observe their worship services in private residences."

The real growth of the Jewish population of the Danish West Indies occurred as a result of the American War of Independence. Dutch St. Eustatius was a major source of military supplies for the North American rebels. In December 1780, Great Britain declared war on Holland and ordered Admiral Sir George Rodney to attack St. Eustatius. On February 3, 1781 he arrived in Oranjestad Harbor with an overwhelming force of 14 ships of the line and 3,000 soldiers. Rodney seized 150 ships, including 60 belonging to Americans, and captured more than 2,000 American merchants and sailors as prisoners of war. English, French, and Danish merchants were extradited to their homelands. The Jewish merchants had their personal possessions taken, some were beaten, others were deported to St. Kitts, and all forced to watch their goods sold at auction. After this experience, many Jewish families sought refuge in the neutral Danish West Indies. The increase in Sephardic Jews in both St. Croix and St. Thomas resulted in the formation of a congregation in Christiansted in 1784. In 1796 the first Synagogue on St. Thomas was erected with the appellation of "Blessing and Peace."

The St. Thomas Synagogue started with a congregation of nine families that increased to 22 families by 1802. The first synagogue was destroyed by fire in 1804 which burned large sections of western and central Charlotte Amalie. By 1812, a second synagogue was built on the same site, but by 1823 proved too small. In 1823, it was replaced by a larger wooden



Central bima for the rabbi raised above the sand floor.

synagogue on the same site, named "Blessing and Peace and Loving Deeds," to accommodate a growing congregation of 64 families.

On New Year's Eve 1831, a fire started in the Commandant Gade section of Queens Quarter, the central part of Charlotte Amalie. Before it burned itself out New Year's Day 1832, it had destroyed about 800 buildings, including the 1823 wooden synagogue. The present St. Thomas Synagogue was built in 1833 of masonry, and has served the Jewish congregation ever since.

The first Confirmation ceremony at the St. Thomas Synagogue, held on October 14, 1843, was the first of its kind ever held in the New World, as noted in an article, entitled "History of the Jews in America," written by Rabbi



M.D. Sasso, and submitted to the *American Jewish Archives Journal* by Rabbi Gunther Plaut,

We learn from a private letter from St. Thomas that the first confirmation among American Israelites took place on the Sabbath Hol ha-Moed Sukkoth [Feast of Tabernacles] in the Synagogue under the charge of the Rev. [Rabbi] Mr. Carillon. The ceremony is represented as having been very imposing. The names of the confirmed are, Mrs. Daniel Wolff, Misses Miriam and Rebecca Wolff, Miss Deborah Simha Cortissos, Miss [Esther] De Meza, Alexander Wolff, and Jacob Benjamin.

In all probability, the cosmopolitan nature of the St. Thomas Hebrew Congregation disposed them to a Reform type of Judaism. In the years following, membership of the Hebrew Congregation increased, with the census records of 1835 showing a population of 467 Jews living in St. Thomas. By 1851, however, the Jewish population had declined to 372 persons. As the prosperity of St. Thomas began to taper off in the last half of the 19th century, so did the Hebrew Congregation.

The year 1867 saw a hurricane hit the island in October, followed by a tidal wave in November, which did great damage to the town, the harbor and shipping facilities. Following World War II, with the increase in air transportation and the development of tourism, the congregation grew again. As it marked the second century of its founding (1796–1996), it was larger than it had ever been in the history of the St. Thomas Jewish community.

Within the confines of the United States, the St. Thomas Synagogue is surpassed in age only by the Touro Synagogue (1763), in Newport, Rhode Island, which was designated a

National Historic Site on March 4, 1946, and is an affiliated unit of the National Park Service. Touro Synagogue, however, was only occasionally used for worship between the 1820s and 1880s, making the 1833 St. Thomas Synagogue the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the United States.

On the evening of September 25, 2000, as a representative of the National Park Service, this author had the pleasure of speaking to the congregation from the bimah of the St. Thomas Synagogue. The occasion was nothing less than the dedication of the synagogue as a National Historic Landmark and presentation of a bronze plaque for its future identification—the only one ever cast with both Hebrew and English text.

Editor's Note: The full text of this article will appear in JOSPIC in the coming months.

Special thanks for all photographs to Sean L. Krigger, VI State Historic Preservation Office, DPNR.

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Synagogue Details

Worshippers arrive to the St. Thomas Synagogue via steps leading up from the street to an ornate wrought iron gate and fence. The gate, adorned by a forged Star of David, gives access to an elegant entrance under a roofed porch, paved in alternating black and white marble tiles.

The Synagogue was constructed as a rectangular one-story masonry building, 41 feet wide by 46 feet in length. The colonnaded facade hints of Greek Revival; the Gothic shaped windows and doors indicate Gothic. White plastered walls, doors and windows are framed by red brick.

The interior maintains a traditional west-east orientation, with the Ark, holding six Torahs, centered against the east wall, and the *bimah* (or pulpit) against the west wall. A square area in the center is defined by four Ionic columns resting on tall pedestals. Raised platforms on the south and north sides of the interior of the Synagogue support mahogany pews, or *bancas*. Traditionally, men sat in the first four rows of mahogany pews, north to south. Additional rows for women and children, raised on broad masonry platforms, run west-east length wise. Seating areas for men and women are separated by 3-foot tall wooden partitions, or a *m'chitzat*.

The interior columns represent the four mothers of Israel: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. These support an architrave, an elaborate frieze, and a projecting cornice. Each arm supports a candle stand and Baccarat crystal shade. The flat white plaster ceiling rises over 18 feet high and six sparkling, six-armed brass chandeliers with glass hurricane shades for candles light the sanctuary.

The *heikhal*, an area containing the Ark, lies two steps above the floor on the east side. Flanking this are benches originally intended to seat the Synagogue's leaders (*parnasim*). Two pedestaled Tuscan columns on the south wall support a scrolled broken pediment flanking the doors of the Ark. Two tablets with the *Decalogue* (Ten Commandments) detailed in gilded Hebrew letters are fixed above. The Lamp of Perpetual Light, the *ner tamid*, hangs before the Ark.

On the west side is the *bimah*, where services are conducted. Two steps below lies the wooden reader's desk. All of the interior wood features, including the Ark, *bimah*, and pews are original, dating to the 1833 construction of the Synagogue. The floor of the Synagogue is paved with ceramic tile. In accordance with Sephardic Jewish tradition, the central floor area is, to this day, covered with about an inch of sand.

