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## The St. Thomas Synagogue, US Virgin Islands

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### INTRODUCTION

The Synagogue of St. Thomas, located in Charlotte Amalie, on the island of St. Thomas, in the United States Virgin Islands, called *Beracha Veshalom Vegemiluth Hasadim* (Blessing and Peace and Acts of Piety), was built in 1833. It is the second-oldest synagogue and longest in continuous use Jewish religious structure in the United States. The Jewish congregation, which was founded in 1796 by Sephardic Jews, had come to the Caribbean with the Dutch to facilitate trade between Europe and the New World. In the mid-1990s, as part of a technical assistance effort by the Southeast Regional Office of the National Park Service, in Atlanta Georgia, the author of this article 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, and upon the completion of the study the Secretary of the Interior designated the synagogue as a NHL on September 25, 1997. This article is based on that landmark study.<sup>1</sup>

### Background History

The Jewish Synagogue and Congregation of St. Thomas can logically trace its roots through some two thousand 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 1500 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 (Kedourie, 1992:8).

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. But in the latter part of the fourteenth century, the religious fervor the Castilian Catholic kings used in their war of liberation, or

*Reconquista*, of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims also became directed at the 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. Most Jews at this time left the urban centers of Spain for rural towns or elected to become "New Christians" or *conversos* (MacKay, 1992:49).

In 1469, the 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 a 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 (Kamen, 1992:74-75).

The Inquisition's job was to pressure Jews to convert and to ensure that *conversos* did not backslide to their original faith (Kamen, 1992:76). During this time, Judaism literally moved underground as basements of houses became synagogues. According to Sephardic tradition, some synagogues, like the St. Thomas Synagogue, have their floors covered with sand to remember this time when Jews covered their basement floors with sand to muffle the sounds of congregations practicing their faith (Rabbi B. Boxman, personal communication, 1995).

On March 31, 1492, the Spanish rulers issued a decree for the expulsion of all unconverted Jews from their realm. In their opinion, having these people living in close proximity to *conversos* might encourage the latter to resume their original faith (Kamen, 1992:76). Jews were given three months to settle their affairs and depart Spain or become *conversos*.

About half of Spain's Jews "converted," with the rest leaving for near-by Portugal, while smaller numbers took boats to southern France, Italy, and areas of the Ottoman Empire where they sought refuge among Jewish communities (Kamen, 1992:84). 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 (Kamen, 1992:83).

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, and the New World for the displaced *conversos* (Kamen, 1992:84, 90). Portuguese permitted *conversos* to immi-

grate to their colonies in India, Brazil, and the Atlantic Islands (Beinart, 1992:119).

It is historical irony that the emigration inflicted on Sephardic Jews became in the long run 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 parts of the globe that were vaguely or completely unknown to them at the time of the 1492 expulsion.

In the sixteenth 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 overseas possessions in the New World, Africa, and the Far East. And, some of these goods were carried in ships captained by *conversos* (Beinart, 1992:120). By the 1590s Jewish merchants and traders in Amsterdam had helped create "northern Europe's foremost emporium for sugar, spices, and all other products from the Iberian colonial empires" (Israel, 1992:194). In return, the Dutch government allowed the Sephardic Jews to build their first synagogue in 1597 and in 1657 all resident Jews were recognized as Dutch nationals (Boxer, 1990:144-145).

As the Sephardic Jews managed most of the trade in New World products that passed through Holland, it was natural that when the Dutch developed their own overseas empire Jews would play an important role (Bloom, 1937:128). 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" (Israel, 1992:203). Innovations in sugar production were introduced by the Dutch and Sephardic Jews between 1638 and 1645, making Brazil the largest exporter of sugar (Watts, 1986:182).

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 (Mintz, 1985:53; Bloom, 1937:144). Thanks to Jewish emigres from Brazil, England drove

Portugal out of the northern European trade in sugar, from its own plantations on Barbados (Mintz, 1985:39). By the 1650s there were Sephardic congregations in Dutch Curacao and Surinam, and English Jamaica and Barbados (Israel, 1992:205).

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 in order to improve his prospects of being employed by the Danish state (Westergaard, 1917:58-59). However, even before his appointment, a few Jewish families had moved to the Danish St. Thomas from other West Indies islands (Boxman, 1983:22).

In 1734, when the Danish government acquired St. Croix from France, Jews originating from Spain, Portugal, and Brazil were among the first to establish sugar plantations on St. Croix (Boyer, 1983:11). Christian Oldendorp, in his 1777 history of the Danish West Indies, noted that "there is 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" (1777:138, 156).

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. Admiral Sir George Rodney was ordered to attack St. Eustatius (Goslinga, 1985:197). On February 3, 1781 he arrived in Oranjestad Harbor with an overwhelming force of 14 ships of the line and 3,000 soldiers (Boxman, 1983:7-8).

Rodney seized 150 ships, including 60 belonging to Americans, and captured more than 2,000 American merchants and sailors which he sent to England as prisoners of war. English, French, and Danish merchants were extradited to their homelands. The Jewish merchants, however, 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 numbers of Sephardic Jews in both St. Croix and St. Thomas resulted in the formation of a congregation in Christiansted in 1784 (Larsen, 1950:96), and in 1796 the first Synagogue on St. Thomas with the appel-



lation of "Blessing and Peace," was built (Knox, 1922:161-163; Boxman, 1983:5).

The St. Thomas Synagogue started with a congregation of nine families that seven years later had increased to 22 families (1802). The first synagogue was destroyed in the fire of November 1804 which burned large sections of western and central Charlotte Amalie. By 1812, there was a second synagogue, on the same site, but by 1823 this building was too small to adequately serve the growing congregation. In 1823, it was taken down and replaced by a larger wooden synagogue, on the same site, named "Blessing and Peace and Loving Deeds" to accommodate a congregation of 64 families (Boxman, 1983:5).

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, and the 1823 wooden synagogue (Svensson, 1965:23; Boxman, 1983:9). The present St. Thomas Synagogue was built in 1833 of masonry, and has served the Jewish congregation ever since (Boxman, 1983:12).

The following account of the synagogue consecration was in the *St. Thomas Tidende* newspaper of September 14, 1833:

We are happy to have in our power to congratulate our friends of the Hebrew religion on the early completion of the New Synagogue. About six o'clock on Thursday evening the congregation assembled in their temporary place of worship, and shortly thereafter proceeded to the New Synagogue in the usual ceremonial order.

At 7:00, His Excellency the Governor, and many respectable persons entered the building and immediately thereafter the Consecration Service commenced. The Lamp of Perpetual Light borne by the eldest member of the Congregation followed by six sacred Rolls of the Pentateuch carried by members, appeared at the entrance, which the elder Priest received. He lighted the Lamp, pronounced the Benediction, and the Lamp was then handed to a younger Priest, who placed it on the stand appropriate for it. During the performance of these offices, the Reader returned thanks for being permitted to witness this solemn and impressive ceremony □ the choir, consisting of young ladies and gentlemen, sang the 24th verse of the 118th Psalm (Gjessing, 1966:100-103).

In the early 1840s, the congregation of St. Thomas appointed Rabbi Carillon to their synagogue who instituted Confirmation ceremonies for 14 year old boys and girls of the congregation

that were intended to compliment the traditional coming of age ceremonies, or *Bar Mitzvah* and *Bat Mitzvah*, for 13 year old boys and girls, respectively. This new ceremony was similar to the Confirmation ceremonies of Gentile religions, and adopted by Reform synagogues with the conscious intent of drawing themselves closer to the countries that granted them full citizenship and to promote religious tolerance. The Confirmation ceremony also had significant legal implications for members.

Confirmation for boys and girls of 14 years was ordered by the king for the Jews, in the mother country [Denmark], since 1814, and has now been extended to our island. I anticipate the happiest results from this measure, as the preparatory form of Catechism etc., will prevent, in my opinion, conversion. A severe penalty is attached to those who neglect it, they are not permitted to become citizens, hold office, marry, control the property they may get by inheritance, follow any trade, nor are their oaths taken in court [Plaut n.d.:583].

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 (Plaut, n.d.:583). 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. Names of the confirmed are Mrs. Daniel Wolff, Misses Miriam and Rebecca Wolff, Miss D[eborah Simha] Cortissos, Miss [Esther] DeMeza, Alexander Wolff, and Jacob Benjamin [Plaut, n.d.:583].

In all probability, the cosmopolitan nature of the St. Thomas Hebrew Congregation disposed them to a Reform type of Judaism. However, not all the congregation was happy with the Rabbi Carillon. In 1844,

A segment of the Congregation led by Judah Sasso and Mashed Mara refused to attend Synagogue services. "Immediately after the return of the Sefer Torah to the Hechal," they charged, "Rabbi Carillon proceeded with the wrong prayers and the Musaph was completely omitted." J. Fidanque, Act.[ing] President Jacob Haim Osorio, J. Levy Maduro, Moses Piza, and Jeudah Piza formed a committee to investigate. They reported that the charges

were well founded. Ritual was rearranged and harmony was restored to the Congregation. Rabbi Carillon left St. Thomas shortly afterwards for Jamaica (Boxman, 1983: 27).

In the years following the building of the new synagogue, the 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 (Paiewonsky, 1959:12). As the prosperity of St. Thomas began to taper off in the last half of the nineteenth century, so did the Hebrew Congregation.

The year 1867 was a disastrous one for St. Thomas. In October a hurricane hit the island, followed in November by a tidal wave, which did great damage to the town, the harbor, shipping facilities, and St. Thomas' reputation as a safe berth (Brønsted, 1952:299).

Following World War II, with the increase in air transportation and the development of tourism, the congregation has again grown in numbers. As the congregation marked the second century of its founding (1796-1996) it is larger than it has ever been in the history of the St. Thomas Jewish community (Boxman, 1983:28-32).

### Description of Synagogue

A series of steps lead up from the street to a wrought iron gate and fence that extends from a small masonry office across to the south side of the lot. The gate, surmounted by a wrought iron Star of David, gives access to a paved forecourt fronting the St. Thomas Synagogue and its entrance under a roofed porch, raised seven steps above the forecourt level and paved in alternating black and white marble tiles.

The St. Thomas Synagogue is a rectangular one-story rubble masonry building, 41 feet wide, by 46 feet in length. The colonnaded temple front of the building depicts a Greek Revival influence, the Gothic shaped windows and doors indicate a Gothic Revival influence. The walls of the Synagogue are constructed of rubble masonry using a mortar of lime, sand, and molasses, and are covered inside and out with white plaster. The framing of door and window openings is red brick and on the exterior it is faced with calcified sandstone laid in an ashlar pattern. The framing of doors and window openings on the interior are of red and yellow brick.

The interior of the Synagogue has a west-east orientation, with the Ark, holding six Torahs, centered against the east wall and the *Bimah* (or pulpit) against the west wall facing the Ark. The builders of the Synagogue created a square area in the center 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*, for the congregation.

Traditionally men sat in the first four rows of mahogany pews on the north and south sides of the Synagogue. On broad masonry platforms, which run the west-east length of the Synagogue, are additional rows of mahogany pews for women and children. The men and women seating areas are separated by 3-foot tall wooden partitions, or *m'chitzat*.

The interior columns represent the four mothers of Israel: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. The columns support a full entablature with an architrave, an elaborate frieze and a widely projecting cornice. Suspended from the center of the vault is an eighteen-armed brass chandelier of French design. Each of the arms supports a candle stand and Baccarat crystal hurricane shade. The ceiling, between the outer walls of the Synagogue and the central area of the vault, is flat and plastered and painted white. This ceiling is slightly more than 18 feet above the floor. Six six-armed brass chandeliers with glass hurricane shades for candles are suspended from this ceiling over the central floor area.

The *Heikhal*, or area containing the Ark, is raised two steps above the floor of the central area on the east side of the interior of the Synagogue. On either side of the *Heikhal* are benches originally intended to seat the Synagogue's leaders (*parnasim*). Two pedestaled Tuscan columns, built into the central area of the south wall, support a scrolled broken pediment, all plastered and painted white. The columns flank the paneled mahogany doors of the Ark. Above the Ark are two blue tablets with the *Decalogue* (Ten Commandments) in gilded Hebrew letters resting on the lower cord of the pediment. Suspended from the ceiling in front of the Ark is the Lamp of Perpetual Light, called the *Ner Tamid*.

On the west side of the interior is the *Bimah*, from which the service is conducted. The *Bimah* area is on three stepped platforms above the central area. Along the west wall behind the reader's lectern on the highest platform is a mahogany wooden bench for the service's participants. Two steps below the *Bimah* area is a smaller octagonal enclosure of the wooden read-

er's desk. All of the interior wood features, such as the Ark, *Bimah*, and pews of mahogany are original 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 of the congregation is covered with about an inch of sand.

### Conclusion

Within the confines of the United States, the St. Thomas Synagogue is surpassed in age only by 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. The congregation of *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim* in Charleston, South Carolina established in 1749 erected its synagogue in 1840. This building was designated an NHL in 1980 in part in the belief it was the second oldest synagogue extant in the country. The St. Thomas Synagogue predates *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim* Synagogue by seven years.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, two people of national and one of international fame were members of the St. Thomas Synagogue's congregation. David Levi Yulee, born on St. Thomas June 12, 1810, went to Florida as a young man where he became the delegate to Congress from the Territory of Florida in 1841, and later in 1845 when Florida was admitted to the Union, was elected as a United States Senator. Jacob Mendes da Costa was born on St. Thomas January 7, 1833, and became a noted American physician and writer. His numerous books on medicine and diagnosis were translated into several languages. Finally, there was Jacob Pizzarro, born on St. Thomas on July 10, 1830. As a teenager he showed an aptitude for art and would move to Paris, where he changed his name from Jacob Pizzarro to Camille Pissarro. It was in France Pissarro developed his artistic genius and became known as the "Father of Impressionism" (Paiewonsky, 1959:9-10; Boxman, 1983:24-26).

On the evening of September 2000, as a representative of the National Park Service this author had the pleasure of speaking from the *Bimah* of the St. Thomas Synagogue to the congregation at the dedication of the synagogue as a National Historic

Landmark and presentation of a bronze plaque – the only one ever cast with Hebrew and English text.

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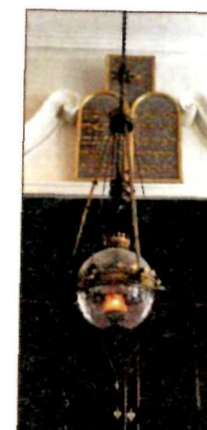
<sup>1</sup>The interested reader may download a complete copy of the NHL study for the St. Thomas Synagogue by going to the National Park Service's NHL website: <http://www.nps.gov/history/nhl/> and clicking on "Sample Nominations." You will be directed to a webpage with a listing of states. Click on "Virgin Islands" and a webpage will come up with a list of downloadable NHL studies (in a PDF format) which includes the "St. Thomas Synagogue."



**Dr. Karen F. Anderson-Cordova and Dr. Mark Barnes, photo taken near Toledo, Spain, on a vacation.**



Saint Thomas Synagogue; the Aron Hakodesh, or Holy Ark, containing seven Sefer Torahs.



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



Central bima for the rabbi raised above the sand floor.



Saint Thomas Synagogue Main Sanctuary