

HISTORY OF BETH ISRAEL CONGREGATION
OF WASHINGTON, PA.

The earliest knowledge of a Jewish family residing in Washington, Pennsylvania, dates back about the time of the Civil War. Henry Schoenthal, who came to this City in 1866 to establish a glass factory, is reported as stating that he found a Jewish family residing here by the name of Goldstein.

The records at the Washington County Court House show the dates of naturalization of the early Jewish settlers as follows:

Henry Schoenthal	1871
S. J. Katzenstein	1873
Nathan Schoenthal	1875
Jacob Arnold	1887
Barnet Samuels	1886
Simon Siegel	1890
Samuel Siegel	1890
Max Federman	1890
Isadore Schoenthal	1890
Louis S. Grossman	1892
Jacob Groginsky	1896
Louis Siegel	1904
Nathan Groginsky	1906

The first regular Jewish religious services held in this community were at the home of Barnet Samuels on West Chestnut Street. (Mr. Samuels was the father of Mrs. Jacob Samolsky and Mrs. L. S. Grossman).

Later, the few Jewish families rented a small one story building at the corner of Fayette and McCarrell Avenues in West Washington where they held services for some time. This site is now occupied by the West End Sub-Station of the City Fire Department.

The movement of the Jewish families toward the business area of the Borough resulted in their seeking a more centrally located place of worship. They rented the second floor of a building on the South side of West Chestnut Street, mid way between Jefferson Avenue and Ruple Avenue. This building, known as Mack's Hall, was occupied until sometime in 1901 when the meat market on the first floor of said building caught fire and the building was destroyed. Having no other place available for services, they were thereafter held at the homes of different members of the community.

It was the fire at Mack's Hall which furnished the incentive for the erection of the first Synagogue at the corner of North Franklin Street and West Spruce Street.

Under the leadership of Rabbi Jacob Goldfarb, who had come to

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Washington in 1890 as Rabbi for the community, the pioneers pledged funds and at the cost of approximately \$4500.00 erected the Synagogue which was recently sold to the Knights of Columbus. (See Pledge sheet).

The organization became incorporated at this time as Beth Israel (House of God). The charter was approved by the Court of Common Pleas of this County on December 9, 1901 in proceedings at No. 1200 In Equity, filed in the Prothonotary's Office of Washington County. (See photostat of original charter).

When the corner stone of the first synagogue building was laid on June , 1902, a sealed box with many interesting enclosures was inserted therein. When the corner stone was opened and the box removed in 1955, there was found therein a parchment message written by Rabbi Goldfarb exhorting posterity to follow our religion according to the old traditions and listing the names of the members and officers of the congregation. This parchment is now on permanent display in the library of our new synagogue. (See photostat).

As the Jewish community grew, it was found necessary to enlarge the synagogue. The basement was remodeled in 1914 and enlarged in 1939. The balcony in the main sanctuary was enlarged to accommodate the new women members of the synagogue. Subsequently, the "Bimah" was removed from the center of the sanctuary and consolidated with the pulpit, and additional benches installed in the new space to seat additional members. A new furnace was installed in the basement and the old gas hot blast stoves on each side of the sanctuary were removed and new benches for the enlarged congregation were placed. The steps at the main entrance to the synagogue were removed and a new concrete double stairway was installed with iron railings and a circular canopy above, which improved the appearance of the exterior of the building.

However, agitation arose for the erection of a community building to meet the social needs of the congregation. In 1930, a resolution was adopted by the Board of Trustees to purchase or erect a new community building, and authorization was given to the officers to borrow the necessary funds for same. However, the onset of the depression and the lack of positive leadership prevented the realization of this aim until December 10, 1952, when a dinner was held in the George Washington Hotel, celebrating the 50th Anniversary of

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the founding of the congregation. It was announced at this dinner that a building campaign would be soon undertaken for the construction of a modern, new religious and social center. Thereafter, under the aggressive leadership of Ben H. Richman, Chairman of the Building Fund campaign and Judge David H. Weiner, President of the Congregation, a building campaign was begun and successfully concluded, which resulted in the erection of the present beautiful edifice on North Avenue. (See Program of the 50th Anniversary Dinner).

Rabbi Goldfarb served the community continuously and faithfully for fifty years, and on May 14, 1941, a banquet was held in the social hall of the old Synagogue celebrating the Golden Anniversary of his service to the Congregation. Rabbi Goldfarb retired on September 1, 1941, and was elected Rabbi Emeritus of the Congregation and continued to retain this honor until his death on March 30, 1949. (See photo of Rabbi Goldfarb).

A Hebrew School was an integral part of the religious life of the Jewish community from the beginning. Rabbi Goldfarb apparently conducted the first Hebrew School, in addition to attending to the other manifold duties as Rabbi. A few years after his arrival, Hebrew teachers were hired who presided over the school as long as Rabbi Goldfarb held the position of Rabbi in the community. The most familiar names of the old Hebrew teachers which are still recalled by the present members of the congregation are Messrs. Bloch, Balsam and Markowitz. Since Rabbi Goldfarb's retirement, the Rabbi has assumed the teaching of the children.

In the early years after the erection of the first synagogue, a Sunday School was conducted for a period of time. Rabbi Goldfarb was the Superintendent of the Sunday School, and among the early teachers was Frank R. S. Kaplan, who was at that time attending Washington and Jefferson College. (Mr. Kaplan is now a prominent lawyer of Allegheny County and recently the President of Copperweld Steel Company.) (See picture of First Confirmation Class of Sunday School.) The Sunday School did not continue very long, and was re-activated in 1925 under the leadership of David H. Weiner who had moved to Washington from Canonsburg and began to take an active interest in Jewish religious life.

On _____, 1954, ground breaking ceremonies were held on the site which had been selected for the new Synagogue, and Rabbi Israel Goodman was honored by breaking the ground and tossing up the first shovelful of earth. (See photograph).

The farewell service was held in the old Synagogue on Sunday, September 4, 1955, officiated by Rabbi Jakob J. Petuchowski and concluded with the removal of the Torahs and a procession by the congregation to the new edifice.

Services were held in the small chapel at the new Synagogue until the High Holidays in September, 1955, when the first services were held in the main sanctuary.

On Sunday, December 4, 1955, an open house was held by the Congregation during which time the general public was invited to inspect the new Synagogue, and an estimated attendance of 4,000 visited the building.

For many years a Free Loan Association was formed by some of the members of the Congregation to assist members who were in financial difficulties. This Association continued in existence for many years.

The ladies of the Congregation early in the history of the Synagogue formed a Ladies' Aid Society, which later became the Beth Israel Sisterhood.

In 1917 the Congregation decided that it should have a cemetery in which to bury its members and their families, and purchased a parcel of land in South Strabane Township where the present Cemetery is now located. The Chevrah Kadisha was formed early in the life of the Congregation, and has been conscientious in carrying out its duties to the present time.