

AGUDAS ACHIM ANSHEI SFARD

The Adams Street Synagogue, Newton, Massachusetts



The Jackson Homestead, Newton, Massachusetts

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The Adams Street Synagogue, Newton, Massachusetts

by Thelma Fleishman

*An informal history based on an exhibition held at
the Jackson Homestead, April–October, 1986*

Published by the Jackson Homestead, Newton, Massachusetts

Foreword

THIS BOOK grew out of an exhibition at the Jackson Homestead, which in turn came about through the desire on the part of the Board of Trustees, the Historical Society and the staff to record and interpret aspects of Newton's recent history. The Adams Street Synagogue was chosen as a subject because it is the oldest Jewish house of worship in a city that, during the twentieth century, has come to have a large Jewish population.

The stream of history reaches into the present, and there is a need to record events which are still accessible to memory. The community of Agudas Achim cooperated in every way to help preserve the story of the synagogue. Since written records are exceedingly sparse, we have had to rely largely on oral history.

The people whose interviews were recorded are Mrs. Barbara E. Adams, Mrs. Betty Fogel, Mr. Franklin H. Fox, the late Mr. Louis Fried, Mr. Elliot Gilfix, Mr. Philip Gilfix, Mrs. Ruth Gootkin, Mr. Nathan Goodman, Miss Bertha Greenwald, Miss Sadie Greenwald, Mr. Elmer Lippin, Mrs. Ruth Pass, Mr. Sam Pass, Mrs. Hazel Santis, Mrs. Jane Shriberg, Mrs. Rose Silverman, Mr. Louis Silverman and Mrs. Mary Tuite. Additional information came from conversations with Mrs. Sylvia Baker Frizl, Mrs. Minnie Baker Gerson, Mr. Maurice Kates, Mr. Philip Milman, Mrs. Helen Baker Norman, Mr. Harry Roiter, Mr. Maurice Roiter and Mrs. Emma Taylor. We are sincerely grateful for the cooperation of all these individuals.

Curator Malinda Blustain and I had the overall responsibility for the exhibition, but the efforts of many people made it an actuality. Particular thanks are due to Janet Freedman and Pauline Mason who made the initial contacts, Roberta Winitzer who spent many days interviewing and recording, Lynette Dennis who had the challenging task of transcribing the oral history tapes, Thelma Fleishman who did the research, the script for the exhibit, and the text for the book, photographers Georgia Litwack and Birgitta Ralston whose remarkable talents produced portraits of some of the interviewees, Harold Lewis who photographed impossible-to-copy advertisements from bound volumes of newspapers, Steve Rosenthal who with consummate art pictured the synagogue and ritual artifacts, Herb Trubek whose skills made mounting the exhibit easier, Susan Abele who cheerfully assisted with tasks of every sort, and Elmer Lippin whose enthusiasm spurred us on. There

could have been no exhibition without the generosity of those who lent photographs, documents and objects. Their names appear in the text.

Franklin H. Fox first suggested this publication and headed the fund drive. Our thanks go to him and to all who contributed. Their names will be found at the end of the book.

Gathering information was a painstaking but rewarding experience for volunteers and staff. We hope that the depth of feelings stirred by the process was as gratifying to those who shared their memories, family photographs and treasures as it was to the interviewers and researchers.

Human memory is fallible, and we do not claim that this is a definitive history of the Adams Street Synagogue. I do believe, however, that this booklet records for the future the story of a small religious community which began in our city more than seventy years ago.

“Our days on the earth are as a shadow,” and yet we have a deep-seated desire to leave a trace on the earth. This tracing of Agudas Achim Anshei Sfard bears the mark of its many contributors, to each and every one of whom I express my warmest gratitude.

DUSCHA SCHMID SCOTT
Director

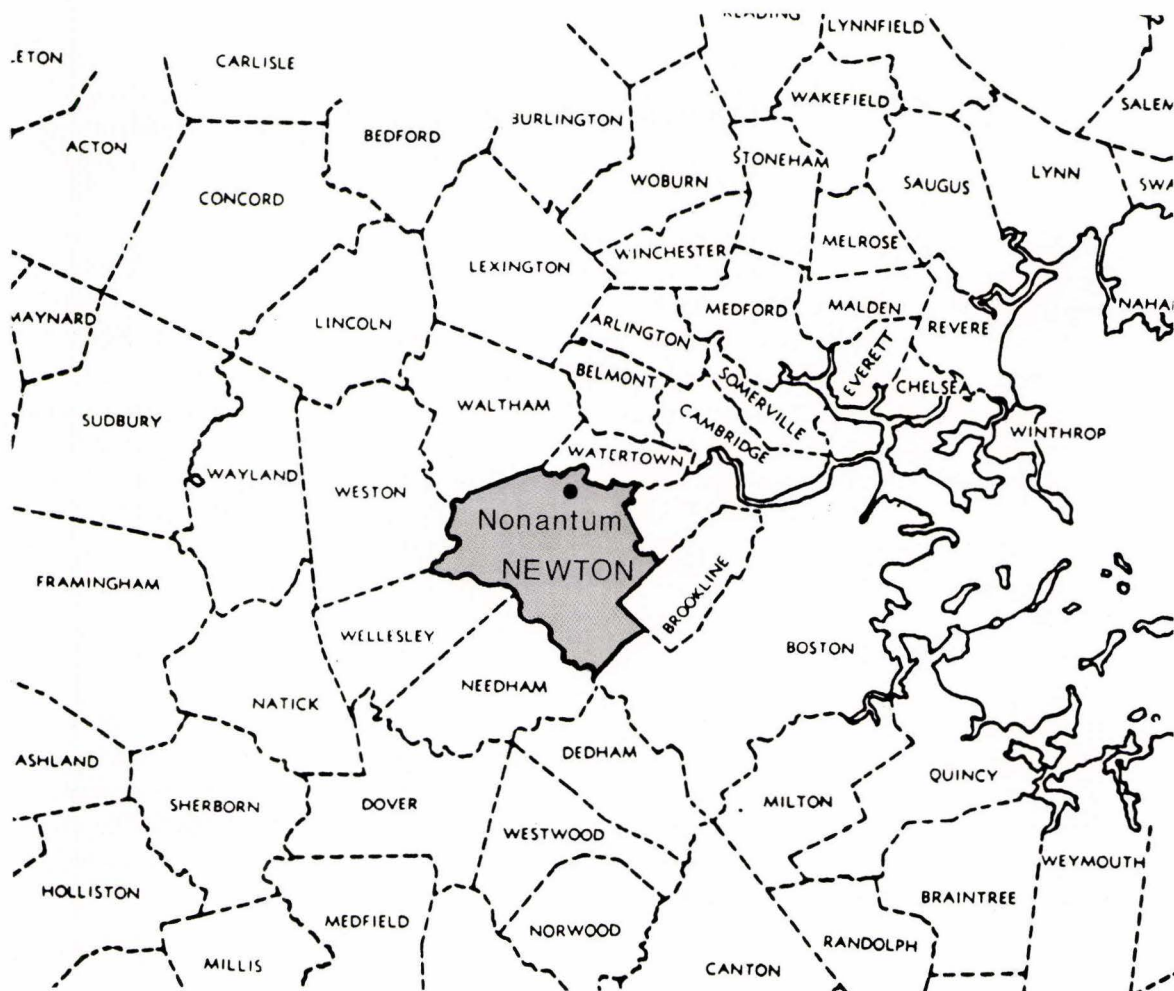
Introduction

NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS, is a three-hundred-year-old community with a population of just over 80,000. Although a city, it is historically and in the minds of nearly everyone who lives there, a collection of distinct villages and neighborhoods which came into being at different times for different reasons. Newton's location, only ten miles from downtown Boston and almost surrounded by the Charles River, is to a large extent responsible for this somewhat unique pattern of development.

The river provided the power which attracted early mill complexes: to Upper and Lower Falls in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and, after the Revolution, to what was later called the North Village.

Proximity to Boston made commuting feasible before it was fashionable, putting Newton in the forefront of suburban development. The Boston and Worcester Railroad laid its tracks to the west through existing Newton villages which were infused with new life when the Company introduced regular passenger service in the 1840s. In addition, new villages developed along the line as people started to take advantage of the frequent runs of the "Newton Special." The next three decades were a time of slow but steady expansion, and in 1873 Newton became a city. During the 1880s the Circuit Railroad brought commuter service to the southern sections of the city. This, together with the electric streetcar, ushered in a period of explosive suburban growth.

In the next thirty years Newton absorbed not only many families from other parts of New England, but wave after wave of first and second generation immigrants. Nevertheless, the city retained, outwardly at least, the characteristics of an Anglo-Saxon Protestant community for many years. This was largely because the insularity of the villages made them in some ways independent social units, and because the new Americans tended to cluster in circumscribed areas in specific neighborhoods. Preeminent among these was that part of Newtonville which came to be known as Nonantum. For generations, this small, self-contained area attracted a religious and ethnic mix which has given it a character all its own.

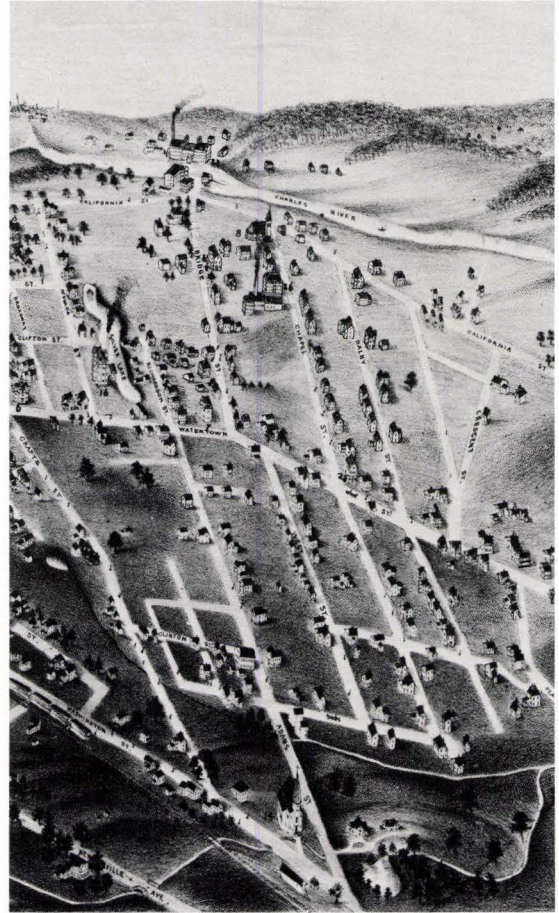


Suburban Boston

Nonantum

The Gateway to Newton

In 1646 the General Court agreed that the village for the Praying Indians near Newton Corner should be called “Nonantum” — “rejoicing.” The name was not associated with the neighborhood known as the North Village until after the Nonantum Worsted Company bought the Dalby Mills on Chapel Street in 1880. In the years that followed, the mills, the expanding railroads and the public works projects of the rapidly expanding city offered opportunities for skilled and unskilled employment which attracted many newcomers. Because Nonantum was able to provide suitable housing, successive waves of immigrants, Irish, French Canadian, Italian and Jewish, made their first homes there.



Nonantum from View of Newtonville 1879



Quirk Court, c. 1890
Jackson Homestead Collections

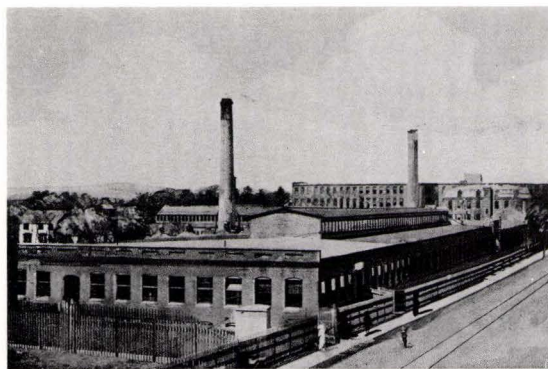
Irish immigrants started coming to Newton in the first half of the nineteenth century. They established a number of small enclaves in the city, many of them settling in what was later known as Nonantum, where there was already a nucleus of inexpensive houses. The names of many of the streets and little courts there still bear testimony to the early Irish presence, for it was they who developed the area further, creating a neighborhood which for decades was to serve as the gateway to Newton. They found work mainly in construction and in the homes of the more affluent who were settling in other parts of the city.



Adams Street, c. 1890
Jackson Homestead Collections



The Silver Lake Cordage Company in the early twentieth century. Silver Lake, which now covers barely half an acre, was much favored by skaters. Courtesy Newton Free Library



The Saxony Worsted Mills bought the bankrupt Nonantum Worsted Company in the 1890s. Courtesy Newton Free Library

The next group of immigrants, the French Canadians, came in the 1880s. They were attracted primarily by opportunities for skilled labor offered by the nearby mills: the Silver Lake Cordage Company, the Aetna complex on the Charles River and the Nonantum Worsted Company.



Lafayette Hall, now the Nonantum Boys' Club, was built by the French Canadians. It was sometimes "let to the Jews for the celebration of their Passover and other feasts." From 1911 to 1969 it served as the Church of St. Jean l'Evangeliste. Jackson Homestead Collections

Finding work was no problem for the Italians. They started coming when both the railroads and the city were embarking on extensive construction projects in order to keep pace with the explosive suburban development then taking place.

LAWN PARTY AND DANCING

The Newton Italian Social and Political Club Entertains at its Club House.

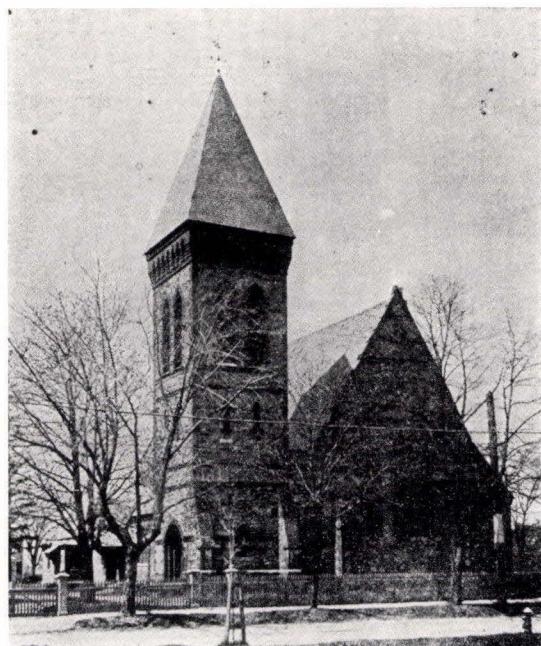
The first Lawn Party and Dance of the Newton Italian Social and Political Club, postponed from Friday evening on account of the inclement weather, was held on Monday evening at the clubhouse grounds on Hawthorne street at the corner of Watertown street.

The thanks for the good time and for the success of the lawn party to the following gentlemen who acted as

Committee of Arrangements and who had worked constantly for many weeks trying to make the affair successful, Luigi de Francesco, Chairman; Oreste Cerulli, Secretary; Antonio Esposito, Treasurer; Giuseppe Antonelli, Nicola Di Lomi, Francesco Russo, Domenico Lanni, F. R. Denning, Michele C. Napolitano, Giovanni Stringillo, Giuseppe D'Angelo, Giuseppe Napolitano, Amato Pescosolido, Giuseppe Notartomaso.

While this organization has only been in existence a short time, its membership is a large one and contains the names of some of the best known residents of Newton of Italian birth or descent.

From *The Newton Times* 1912



The North Congregational Church in 1916
Jackson Homestead Collections

In 1861, members of the Eliot Congregational Church, aware that many families of "English extraction of the Protestant faith" were living in Nonantum, started a Sunday School there. This was the first step that led to the incorporation of the North Congregational Church five years later. The building shown here dates from 1873. It is now the Evangelical Baptist Church.



Stearns Elementary School
Jackson Homestead Collections

The Stearns Elementary School, which many of the children attended, was referred to as “a Melting Pot of the nations” in *The Newton Times* in 1914.

In that year it was estimated that about forty percent of the children in Nonantum were of foreign extraction, but the article concluded,

“If anyone is pessimistic as to the Americanization of foreigners or the far-reaching importance of the Public School, he should visit the Stearns school which . . . is striving to inculcate the true spirit of America into an entire neighborhood.”



Nonantum Vacation School
Jackson Homestead Collections

Private organizations, too, tried to help the children assimilate. The Vacation School in Nonantum was established by the Newton Social Science Club in 1889. There *“they would teach us how to become a successful housewife; how to set a table. We knew about butter spreaders . . .*

because girls from Wellesley College were volunteers.”

The school was eventually taken over by the School Department.

This, then, was the neighborhood into which Jewish families started moving in the 1890s.

The Jewish Community in Nonantum

Immigration

By 1901 at least half the Jewish families that had come to Newton had settled in Nonantum. They came from Russia, many of them from the Ukraine, and from the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, most of them had lived elsewhere in New England or New York first and came with young families. Many of them were related.

How he got to Watertown Square [from Ellis Island] I don't know . . . some fellow was with his girlfriend and he saw this fellow with a bag and he put him on a bus and gave him a nickel and said, "Make sure you let him out on the corner of Watertown and West streets . . . and cross the street with him and tell him where to go . . . and someone will see him." And that's how my father got to his brother.

[Mother] came over here in 1902 . . . when she was fourteen. She came with a big puffed blanket. They put her on board with a baker,

and he was supposed to be her father in order to get her on that boat. She had no parents and the grandparents were very elderly and very ill. And this man was given x number of dollars . . . which I can't remember—to see her come over here. . . . And they brought her first to New Jersey . . . then she came to her one relative which was her sister in Lawrence . . . she used to go to work in the factory. Six in the morning she had to be at work. She would get up at five and save two cents which was the trolley fare. And they worked until six . . . slave work. . . . She had to earn her way in the house too. She paid board, but she helped too.

For some, the early years were difficult ones:
. . . \$12 a month rent was what we paid on Cook Street. We had one gas lamp in the kitchen, nothing in the dining room . . . we used to go upstairs with a lantern to the bedroom . . . two bedrooms, no bathroom. . . .

Joseph Hoffman's
naturalization papers
Courtesy Gootkin Family

United States of America.



Massachusetts District, ss.

To all people to whom these presents shall come:

Greeting.

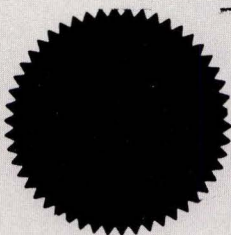
Know Ye, That at a District Court of the United States,
holden at Boston, within and for the Massachusetts District, on the
sixteenth day of *October*, in the year
of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and *ninety-five*

of *Boston* *Joseph Hoffman*
in said district, a *tailor*
born in *Russia*, having produced
the evidence, and taken and subscribed the oath required by law, was

Admitted to Become a Citizen of the United States,

according to the Acts of Congress in such case made and provided, all of which
appears of record in said Court.

In Testimony Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and
affixed the seal of said Court at Boston aforesaid, this
fourteenth day of *November*, A. D. 191*6*
and in the one hundred and *thirty-fourth* year
of the Independence of the United States of America.



William T. Johnson

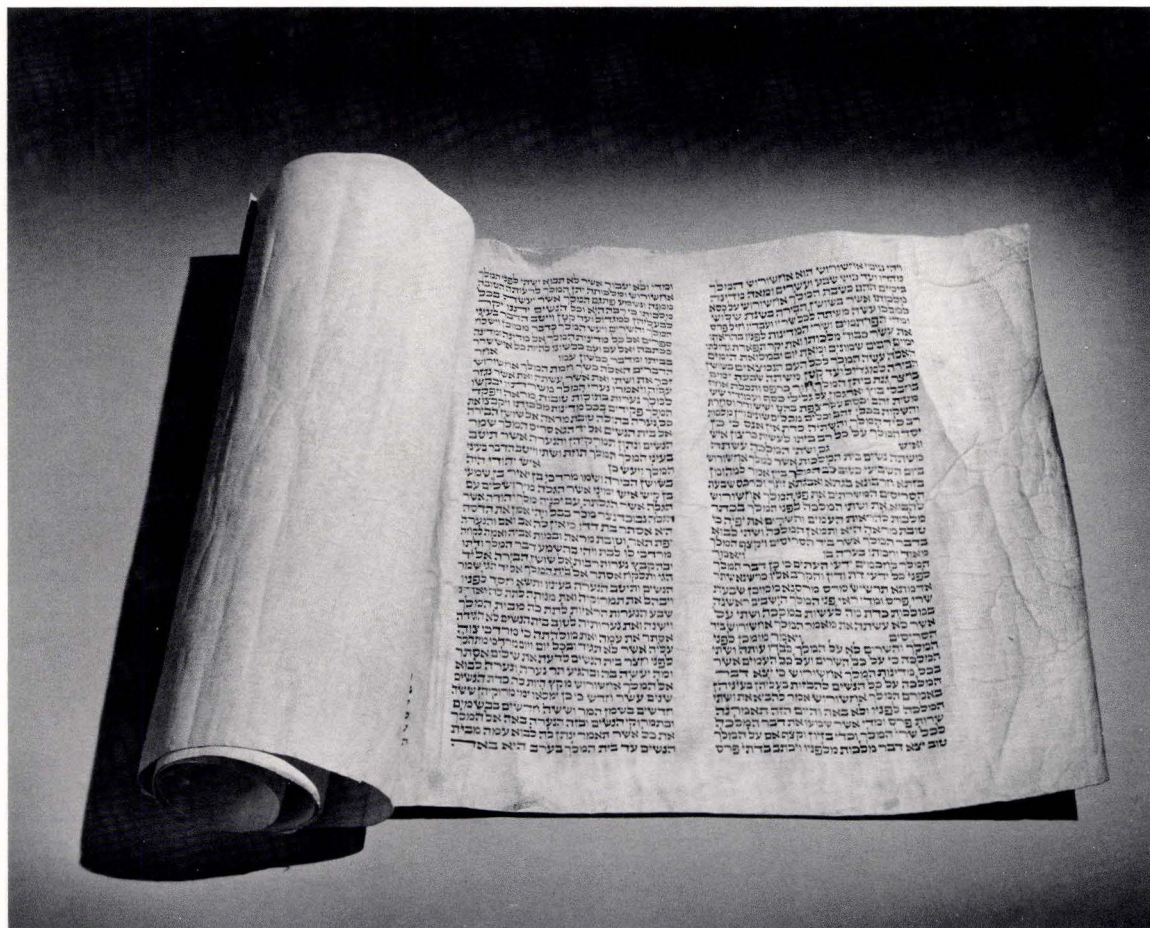
Clerk of the District Court of the United States,
for the District of Massachusetts.



In the Old Country: Mordecai and Chana Bella Marana, mother and father of Sarah Judith Gilfix
Courtesy Gilfix family



The Benjamin Gilfix family, c. 1906. Left to right:
Joseph, Sarah Judith, Rose, Jacob, Philip,
Benjamin, Isaac
Courtesy Gilfix family



The Book of Esther, or Purim Magillah, inscribed by Mordecai Marana and brought to this country by his daughter, Sarah Gilfix
 Courtesy Adam Gilfix

Earning a Living

By the second half of the 1890s, Nonantum was the most densely populated area in Newton, with a burgeoning commercial strip on Watertown Street. It was at this time that the first Jewish storekeepers made their appearance. Eventually *"there was Swartz's, the hardware store—it's still there—and there was Fox's drug on the corner of Chapel and Watertown streets . . . and there was Perlmutter's and then there was Fried's . . ."*

These advertisements appeared in *The Newton Times* in 1911.

Photographed for the exhibition by Harold B. Lewis

J. Swartz

Wholesale and Retail Dealer in

Hardware, Cutlery, Tinware

Woodenware, Crockery and Glassware

A FULL LINE OF 5 AND 10 CENT GOODS

KITCHEN FURNISHINGS AT BOSTON PRICES

Telephone Connection

353-355 WATERTOWN STREET

NEWTON

We Are Not Physicians

Do not ask us to prescribe. When sick see your doctor and bring us his prescription. We use only the best and purest drugs and chemicals.

Alexander Fox

334 WATERTOWN STREET

NONANTUM

*And they used to have tables and the ice cream chairs.
... My father used to take us there on a Sunday
afternoon for a hot fudge.*

Free!

Free!

100 Special Hand Painted Pictures mounted on plate glass to be given away FREE to the first 100 customers making a purchase of One Dollar, and bringing this coupon printed herewith.



The following is a partial list of our offerings for the next 3 days:

MEAN'S 50c and 75c DRESS SHIRTS, attached and detached collars, for.....:30c MEAN'S POLICE AND FIREMEN'S SUSPENDERS at:15c MEAN'S SPECIAL CANVAS GLOVES at 6c a pair, or 3 pairs for.....:25c	LADIES' BEST 100c CORSETS, with garters attached very latest design for.....:30c LADIES' 50c, 75c AND 100c SHIRT WAISTS in all colors, including some of our very best numbers for.....:30c Closing out 100 lbs. of FLEISHERS' FLOSS YARN at:5c a skein
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Special Reduction on Shoes

Perlmutter Brothers

Department Store

337-339 Watertown St., Newton

FREE DELIVERY

Tel. 299 N. N.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

Now, by a strange coincidence the Hungarians were not so orthodox. They were the merchants . . . and they did work on the Sabbath.

Morris Fried

Newton's Oldest Department Store

310-312 WATERTOWN STREET, NEWTON

Ladies', Men's and Children's 15c. Hosiery on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, at 9c. a pair.

Full size Sheets at 39c., regular price 69c.

12 1-2 and 1 5c. Pillow Cases for this sale at 9c. each.

If you went into Fried's and your daughter or son should be getting first communion or confirmation clothes, the Frieds would outfit them. They wouldn't ask for money. If you were broke you still got your outfit.



Perry's Department Store
Courtesy Mrs. David Dangel

H. Perry's Department Store

376 WATERTOWN STREET, NEWTON

(Opp. Engine House)

Notice to the Public

Special Clearance Sale in Dry Goods, Shoes, Rubbers, Men's and Children's Clothing, Bags, Trunks, Suit Cases, etc. All our stock for this sale at $\frac{1}{2}$ price.

Don't miss this chance—Call to see us and save money.

There were also the junk dealers. Because it was primarily a working-class area, it was easier to get a license in Nonantum than in other parts of Newton. At one time *"there were twenty to twenty-five 'junkies' in our neighborhood."* Being self-employed they were free not to work on the Sabbath and in addition it was not necessary to be fluent in English.

This fellow had a furniture store and this fellow had a hardware store and we, in our little circle, wouldn't do that because it required working on the Sabbath. So rather than work on Saturday [he] went to work as a junk dealer, peddling and trying to make a living out of it. . . . But you were your own boss, so they were almost an elite in their own minds.

This opinion was not always shared by others.

However, no matter how they made their livings *"those folks never knew about fun in those days. There was work, work, work."*

The Jewish people who came here were willing to sacrifice a generation so that the second generation would be in a better position to live and to progress and to develop and to be a credit to both their religious background and to their American environment . . .

By the time the synagogue was built they *"were almost a hundred percent self-employed. Not any that I knew worked for anyone else and surprisingly, almost a hundred percent owned their own homes."*

“Being Jewish was a Way of Life . . .”

The reminiscences of second generation members of Congregation Agudas Achim and others, together with such photographs as we have been able to assemble, help evoke immigrant Jewish life in pre-World War I Nonantum.

Although differences in culture and outlook inevitably caused disagreements from time to time, the overriding impression which emerges is of their deep family affection, the bond of their orthodox Judaism and their sense of responsibility for each other.

. . . we'd all get together and the holidays were wonderful and we knew everyone else. It was not too small and not too large, we really were a devout, respectful, traditional group.

. . . and before the synagogue was built we would know if Abraham held a yahrzeit for his mother—you didn't have to be told, you just went over there to his home and helped make the minyan—which is ten people—so he could observe the yahrzeit. “Yahrzeit” is the anniversary of a death, usually of a parent.

He would come into our kitchen on a rainy day when the junk dealers couldn't go out and they would sit around and talk and have a glass of tea and put a plop of sugar in [his mouth] and sip the tea through it . . .

We had to speak Jewish at home . . . because my mother said, “English I can learn, but if you don't learn Jewish when you're at home, you'll never learn it . . .”

. . . and there was a block we used to call it Coxeter's Block. He was a rich WASP dentist and mostly Jews lived in the block . . . and in the back were three junk dealers . . .

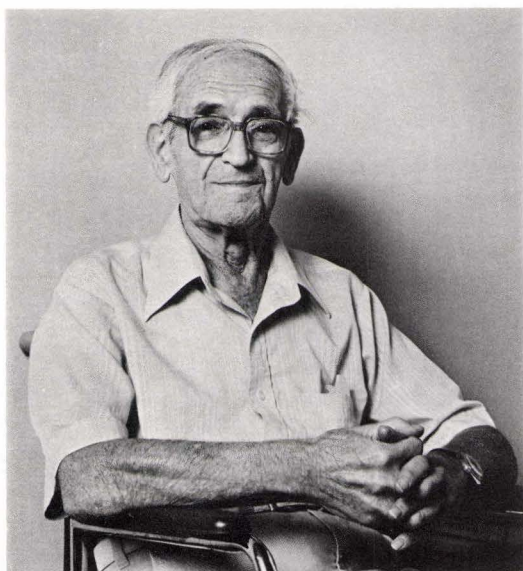
. . . we used to call it “Coxeter's Hotel.”

The only place where there was a little congregation was a little street called Maguire Court off Crafts Street . . . it seemed to be the lowest rentals.

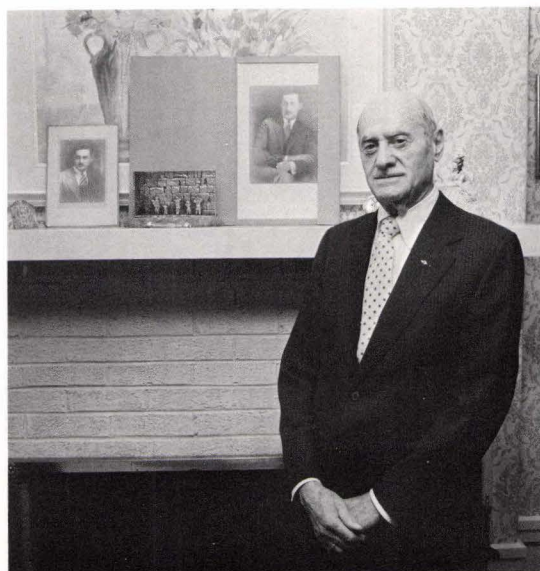
Alexander Maguire's granddaughter says, “I've been told that my grandfather never let them move till they bought their own home . . . [He] didn't give them money, he gave them good advice. . . .”

I was born in Maguire Court. Literally born in the Court.

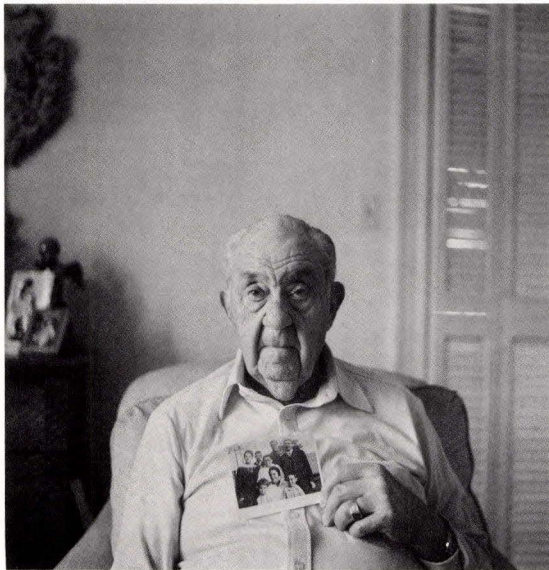
Some of Those Interviewed



The late Louis Fried



Philip Gilfix



Nathan Goodman



Sam and Ruth Pass

Friends and Neighbors

Growing up in ethnically mixed Nonantum had its ups and downs. Some who were then children remember being subjected to anti-Jewish epithets, and even coming to blows, particularly with their Irish neighbors. On the other hand, the synagogue was never harmed in any way, and others who were interviewed have only the warmest memories of those around them, both black and white. After all, if they spoke Yiddish at home, others used Italian or French, and they all went to the same schools, played the same games, and skated on the same ponds.

It was not easy growing up in 1903 . . . the anti-semitism at that time didn't have to be put into a velvet glove. It was quite obvious and vocal. . . .

We lived next to the French Church which is now a club house, and the priest told us that he admired the Jewish people for the way they lived.

Nobody ever called me Jew or anything.

. . . the older I get the more Jewish I get because you felt ashamed of it growing up in such a Christian environment. And they looked down on you for being Jewish.

I used to go with Catholic kids and they would take me to wakes, and they'd kneel and I'd kneel. . . .

They would pass our homes on the way back from school on Adams Street and they would talk and call the Jews "Christ-killers." And as they passed our properties they would try to do damage at times. But we fought our way out, and eventually it all worked out. Nobody was really hurt.

The "junkies" with long beards were snowballed in the wintertime . . .

Because from the day I was born I heard how wonderful the Jewish people were.

We all got along and no one gave us a course on how to do it.

Keeping Kosher

Memories of what it was like to grow up in an orthodox Jewish home differ little. There was no kosher food to be had in Newton nor, in the early days, in the communities nearby. The closest and most convenient stores were in Boston's West End which, until it fell victim to urban renewal in the late 1950s, was a focal point in that city's Jewish life.

So every Thursday and Saturday, like the postmen sleet or rain wouldn't stop them, they'd go down to the West End. Thursday to shop, get their chickens what-

ever [for the Sabbath] and then Saturday night for the week . . .

So every Saturday night you'd go to Newton Corner and take the streetcar to the West End and you'd buy all the things you'd need for the week and carry it home in the streetcar and then carry it two miles back to the house. Sometimes it was one o'clock in the morning before you got there . . .

My mother would take two of us with her to the West End to help her carry.



And the Bakers had a grocery store — my grandmother would take me marketing with her, and Mrs. Baker always had a barrel of pickles which she preserved. And I would sit on the stoop and eat those pickles and to this day nothing has ever tasted so good.

The Baker family, c. 1912
Courtesy Mrs. Helen Baker Norman

“Remember the Sabbath Day . . .”

To orthodox Jews the Sabbath is more than a day of rest—in the liturgy its coming is likened to that of a bride—and the excitement in anticipation of sundown on Fridays is one of the memories that remains with nearly everyone.

We looked forward to Fridays. Rushing home from school and having these delicacies that my mother started to make at four or five in the morning . . . and we'd all get together and we'd never have an appointment on a Friday night . . .

I knew that when I got home from school the whole thing was complete. The floor was shining bright, the stove was like a mirror and she [Mother] wore a white apron a bit like linen, like the table with the white napkins, and the chale and of course the whole bit with the wine. . . . The white table linen is traditional.

So that when the Sabbath came the entire house took on, as I say, a total transformation. You wouldn't believe it.

For the children the food was central to everything.

I remember the smell of burning feathers . . .

The gevilte fish was steaming . . .

The lockshen (noodles) was cut at home . . .

Some families were more observant than others.

Because bearing a burden can be regarded as work, the very orthodox do not carry things on Holy Days.

Yes, she would come to see my father on a Saturday and she always had a handkerchief tied around her wrist—she was wearing it, she wasn't carrying it . . .

Kindling a fire on Holy Days is one of the prohibitions mentioned in Exodus.

Billy lived across the street from us and he used to come over on Friday nights to put the lights out for us, and Saturday morning he'd come and stoke the fire for us . . .

There are at least two elderly men who remember being given a nickel to turn off the lights in the synagogue.

Because my family had a department store we were open on Friday night and we were open on Saturday, but we had a kosher house and my father and I went to shul together . . .

My mother didn't keep a kosher home. But she did funny things: she wouldn't eat ham on Passover . . .

“Thou Shalt Keep a Feast of Unleavened Bread . . .”



Joseph and Ziporah Roiter with their family at
Passover Seder, c. 1942
Courtesy Mr. Harry Roiter



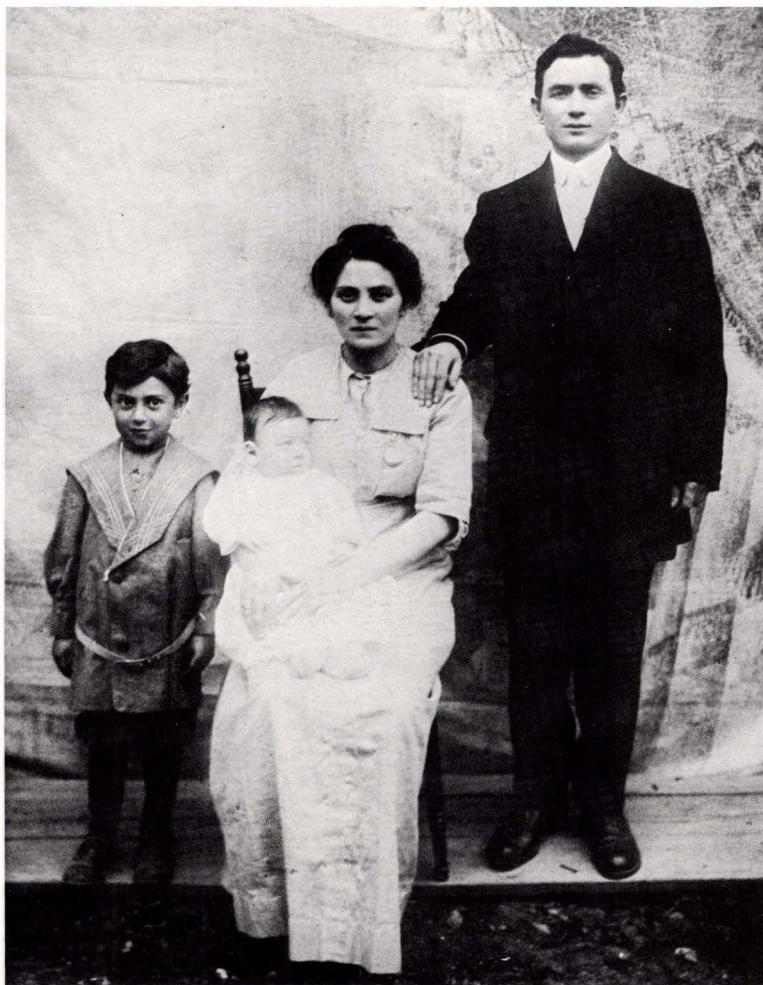
Horace Mann Grammar School Graduating Class,
1909. Rose Gilfix is in the first row, fourth from left;
Rose Shriberg is in the second row, second from left.
Courtesy Family of Rose Shriberg Flaxer



Rose Shriberg. Newton
High School Graduation
Courtesy Family of Rose
Shriberg Flaxer



William Shriberg
Courtesy Mrs. Jane
Shriberg



The Pass Family, c. 1913: Jack, Sam, Ida, Abe
Courtesy Mrs. Ruth Yanco Pass



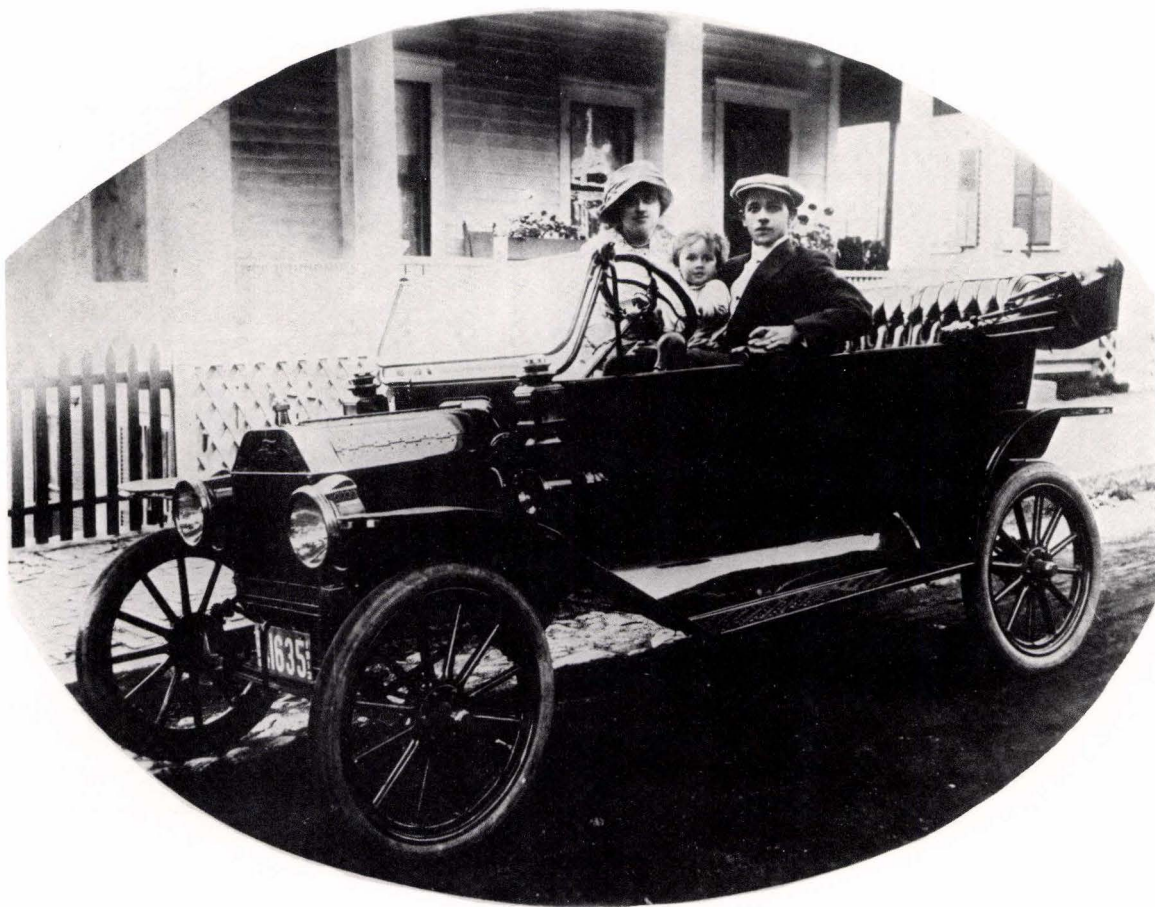
Jacob Pass, from an Eliot
School class photograph
Courtesy Mrs. Ruth
Yanco Pass



Hannah Rachesky,
the mother of
Mrs. Abraham Fox
Courtesy Mrs. David
Dangel



The Fox Family: William Wolf, Abram B., Herbert L.,
c. 1920
Courtesy Mrs. David Dangel



Mr. and Mrs. Abram B. Fox and Herbert, c. 1914
Courtesy Mr. Franklin H. Fox



Map of Nonantum

The Synagogue

ORTHODOX JEWS do not drive nor walk long distances on the Sabbath or other Holy Days. However, it was not long after the arrival of the first Jewish families in Nonantum that there were enough of them within walking distance of one another for a minyan, or quorum of ten adult males necessary for holding most religious services. It was thus probably around the turn of the century that they started gathering for services in each other's homes. Also, the granddaughter of Alexander Maguire remembers that her *"mother said that her father said that all the Jewish men would go into the living room in Maguire Court and they would have their service. My grandfather would lie on a couch in the kitchen and smoke his pipe."* For holidays they rented larger premises: Lafayette Hall on Dalby Street and possibly others, such as those above the stores in Newtonville Square.

In 1909, the "Hungarians," a group composed predominantly but not exclusively of the store owners, incorporated Knesses Israel Anshei Sfard. They bought the house at 97 Dalby Street to use as a synagogue. Mrs. Hazel Schwartz Santis, whose parents bought the place some years later, remembers *"many Jewish marks on the walls—it was a holy inscription. My mother would never let it be repainted."* This was the first Jewish congregation in Newton, but it lasted only a few years, and in 1914 the house was sold and the remaining members joined Agudas Achim Anshei Sfard. Incorporated in October 1911, this is now the oldest congregation in the city.

The signatures of Jacob Swartz, Joseph Mielman, Joseph Roiter, Jacob Kligman, Hyman Mielman, Benjamin Gilfix and Morris Gilfix are on the charter.

Erecting a synagogue was an ambitious undertaking for this small and not too affluent community. Money was raised by auctioning aliyahs (the honor of being called upon during the service to read a portion of the Law), and they all gave according to their means. In addition, donations were received from well-wishers such as Jacob Schiff of New York, the Honorable Sinclair Weeks, a former mayor of Newton, and other sympathetic non-Jewish Newtonians, Dr. Thomas Gallagher and Joseph Flanagan among them.

The cornerstone was laid in August, 1912, and the building was in use by the end of the year.

TO LAY CORNER STONE.

Impressive Ceremonies at Site of New Synagogue to Take Place Sunday Next.

On Sunday, August 4, at 3 o'clock, the Hebrews of Newton, will celebrate a great event in the laying of the corner stone of the first Synagogue to be built in Newton. During the last fifteen years, which have seen the growth of this sect in Newton, a great struggle for religious existence has gone on continually. Small in numbers, and of limited means, the Jewish members of the community have always zealously observed their religious tenets, in spite of their limited facilities for conducting their worship. At first, the homes of the various members were utilized,

for Sabbath day services, each considering it his bounding duty to as better means were afforded. Now feeling stronger and their unity of purpose being fixed, the Hebrew residents of Newton have decided to erect a Synagogue, the first in Newton, where there religious life may be cemented and its future assured.

In carrying out this purpose, a great financial hardship, is being undergone by each individual concerned, yet with high hopes and implicit trust in the community in which they reside, complete success in this undertaking is assured.

The Synagogue, which is to be erected on a plot of land situated at 114 Adams St., Newton, is to be a two-story, half cement, tile and smooth red brick finish structure. The ground floor is to be used as a Sabbath school room, vestry and meeting rooms. The upper floor and gallery is to be the Synagogue proper and place of worship. Simplicity, the universal quality of Judaism is to be the chief feature in its construction.

Leading Rabbis and Cantors of Boston and vicinity will officiate at the exercises in the afternoon. Abraham Alpert, Esq. of East Boston will act as master of Ceremonies. Rabbi Friederman will also be prominent during the services. Mayor Hatfield has accepted an invitation to speak to the guests of the occasion, subject to his freedom from the many and various activities in which he is prominent.

Other personages of local prominence are also to speak and assist during the exercises.

The arrangements for the exercises are in charge of Building committee, assisted by the Ladies' Auxilliary of the Congregation Agudath Achim.

The Building Committee of the Agudath Achim Congregation, consists of Mr. Max Silverman, Mr. Morris Gilfix, Mr. Benj. Gilfix, Mr. H. Perry, and Mr. J. Swartz, Treasurer.

From the front page of *The Newton Times*, July 31, 1912

**איבעראשענדע נייעס פיר
ניוסאונער יהודים!**



**א גרויסער יום טוב אין
ניוסאון!**

מיט פריידע בעגאברייכטען מיר אלע יהודים פון ניוסאון און אומגענענד או ענדליך איז אונזער וואונט נאך פילדע
מיהע און ענגעניע טרפילט געווארען צו האבען

— א איינע פון דיא שיינע שוהלען אין ניוסאון, מאסס, —

אין 15-טען דעצעמבער, 1912 אום 12 אהר מיטאג צייט
אין 114 אדאמס סטריט, דא

גרענר אפענינג פון אנודת אחים שוהר

וואו הרב פרידערמאן און הרב ראפנינאוויץ וועלען דעם פיבליקום
אדרעסירען

דער בערוהמטער חזן פון נארטה ראסעל סט. שוהר, איוויק הערדער
דער בערוהמטער כלל מוהיק, מר. איזאק הערדער
אין נאך פראמינענטע רעדנערס וועלען פארטרעטען האלסט

דער ווייניג צוא זאגען או דיא קאמיטעי האט געמיינט איהר בעסט או עס ואל וין איינע פון דיא בעסטע ענטשטיינענעס וואס ניוסאון
האט ווען געהאט. דערום אפערירען מיר צו יעדען איינציען מענטש ניט צו פערנאכטליכען דעם געלעגענהייט און אנוועזענד ווין
דער פארייד וועט ויך סטארשען פון 190 אדאמס סטריט
אינאנשטירט פון דער קאמיטעי

עס איז ווייניג צוא זאגען או דיא קאמיטעי האט געמיינט איהר בעסט או עס ואל וין איינע פון דיא בעסטע ענטשטיינענעס וואס ניוסאון
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דאסערט (איש קאוינע) וועט ויך מאכטער
אך סער נאכאנעם

ב. סילווערמאן, ווייס-פרעידענעס
דאסערט, פריענדעס
דאסערט, פריענדעס, 335 וואטערשטון סטריט

→ Good News for Newton ←

With pleasure we announce that with great difficulty we have at last been able to obtain the beautiful
Synagogue Agodas Achim, in Newton, Mass.,
SUNDAY, December 15, 1912, at 12 o'clock noon

The GRAND OPENING will take place at **114 Adams Street**

RABBI FRIEDERMAN & RABINOVITZ will address the public, and Cantor EMANUEL SHAFER
and Choir from the North Russell Street Synagogue of Boston, together with an excellent Orchestra
will entertain us. The well-known Mr. ISAAC HELLER and other prominent men of Boston
will address us. The Committee spared no expense to make the opening a grand success.
Don't lose this opportunity, but join us and together we will have one grand time. There
will be a GRAND MARCH from 190 Adams Street

Millmeister, Printer 91 Leverett Street, Boston

Refreshments will be served

No one can remember the name of the building contractor, but he seems to have come from outside Newton. Those congregants who were able to help did so where possible.

My father was a carpenter in the old country. . . . My brother remembers—he must have been about thirteen years old at the time—going there with my father and helping laying the flooring there, nailing it, and running little errands. So I know they did a lot of the work themselves.

At first only the bare essentials were built. The steps leading to the front entrance were of wood until after World War I when Morris Fried donated “*a brand new foundation for the whole building: front steps, back steps, sidewalks all around the building*” to mark the safe return of his son David from the Army.



The Synagogue

In orthodox congregations women and men are seated separately.

The picture opposite was taken from the women's gallery. In the foreground is the bimah from which the service is conducted by the cantor (chazan) and on which the Scrolls of the Law (Torah) are placed for reading. The design on the curtain is traditional.

The interior, too, was at first unadorned.

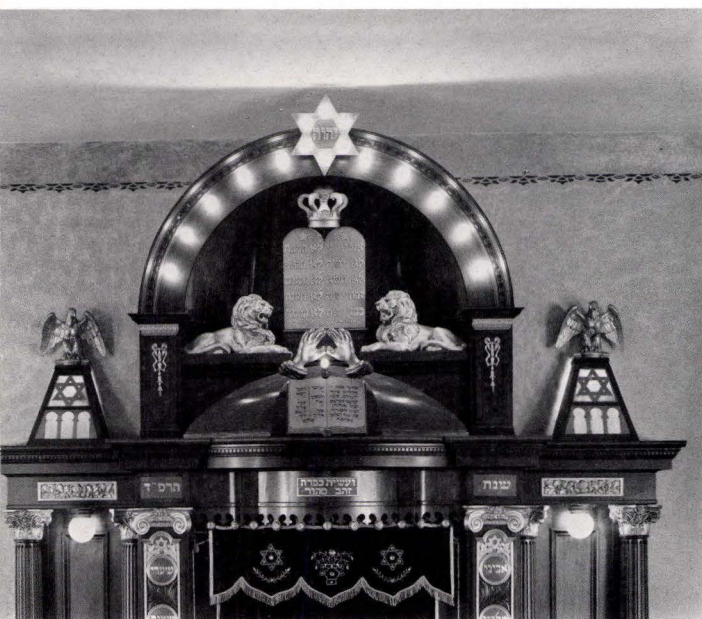
While the building was still under construction school desks were made available by Wellesley College and these provided the seating downstairs until the benches now in use were brought from Kehilet Israel in Brookline in the 1950s.



Interior



The Ark



The Ark (detail)

The most significant change to the interior was the installation of the Holy Ark (Aron Kodesh) and the bimah in 1924. Both structures, which now dominate the building, were designed and built by Mr. Samuel Katz. Before then the Torah was kept in a simple wooden cabinet or secretary.

Much of the iconography is traditional. Some, such as the crown, the eternal light and the lavish use of gold date back to Biblical times.

Below the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, the hands are those of a priest (cohen) raised while pronouncing the blessings which are inscribed on the open book beneath them.

Below the cornice are the date 5684, corresponding to 1924 in the Gregorian calendar, and God's injunction to Moses: "And thou shalt make a covering of gold" (Exodus 25: 17).



The Bimah Committee in front of the new Ark, 1924. Left to right: Louis Fried, Joseph Hoffman, Abraham Schreier, Joseph Roiter, Hyman Perry, Louis Baker, Samuel Bram
Courtesy Mr. Elmer Lippin



Samuel Katz
Courtesy Mr. Maurice Kates

Samuel Katz was born in the Ukraine in about 1885 and trained as a cabinetmaker. He came to this country in 1911 and two years later settled in Troy, New York. While earning a living making refrigerator cases (then a novelty) for food stores and restaurants, he built the bimahs and arks for the synagogues in Albany and Saratoga Springs.

After a few years he moved to Chelsea, Massachusetts, and in time had woodworking shops there and in Dorchester. During the 1920s and '30s he was responsible for arks in at least half a dozen synagogues in the Greater Boston area.

The document on the opposite page is indicative of the interest second generation members of the congregation were taking in the affairs of the synagogue by the 1920s. They *“ran shows and dances and turned over the receipts to help refurbish—or furbish—”* the building. In due course, with the help of the Young Men’s Hebrew Association, this included completing the basement, which then provided a meeting place for non-religious activities such as those of the Newton Hebrew Ladies Aid. Founded about the time the synagogue was built, or maybe earlier, so that *“no Jewish family should do without,”* this organization pursued that purpose for many years, discreetly helping those in need.

Over time, there were other gifts from both families and individuals. Mrs. Jane Shriberg remembers rapping on doors and collecting \$50 to replace *“the little white curtain . . . I don’t know how old it was”* that hung in front of the ark. That was in the 1920s when she first came to Newton. The present curtain was given in memory of Joseph Roiter who had a deep attachment to Agudas Achim, both to the congregation and to the building. Many contributions were received when the new benches were installed. The red carpet on the bimah and in front of the ark was the gift of Mrs. Sarah Burg.



Joseph Roiter, c. 1904
Courtesy Mr. Harry Roiter

to the
Agudas Achaim Congregation
Newton, Mass.

We, the undersigned, as authorized representatives
of the Agudas Achaim Congregation have
received this day a donation of

—H ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY FOUR DOLLARS —H

to be used specifically for the purpose
of building an Oran Achodesh or Ark
for the Holy Scrolls in our Synagogue.

The executive committee of the
Newton Junior Council reserves the right
to apply this donat. in for any other purpose
of immediate rel. in to the Agudas
Achaim Congregation.

Signed

attested:-

Regina Zifigbaum
Chellie Bauer
Ida Roter
Sara E. Shuman
Hazel F. Schwartz

FEBRUARY 1ST 1924

Attest:
L. Fisher
Samuel Buss
J. Reith
W. Fisher
J. Hoffman

H. Pany
Louis & Nida

Not all the Jews in Nonantum joined Agudas Achim and many members lived elsewhere: at least four families walked from Watertown. The synagogue became a “meeting place . . . there were a lot of different minds there and a lot of petty disputes about traditional ways of performing the services, because each person interpreted the correct way from what it was in the old country. And because there was no Rabbi, there was no one to say: ‘This is the Law.’”

There never was a permanent Hebrew teacher; in some cases basic instruction came from the parents, but there seems always to have been someone to prepare the boys for their bar mitzvahs. After the basement was finished, classes were held there when numbers warranted it.

Neither was there a full-time cantor. Generally the congregation ran the services themselves, but the task of finding someone to officiate on the High Holidays fell mostly to the president. Louis Baker was the first to hold this office, and was followed by Joseph Roiter, whose children remember visiting cantors and rabbis joining them at home to break their fast after the Day of Atonement. After Joseph Roiter’s death, Harry Roiter succeeded his father as president, and Elmer Lippin took over the care of the building.

Over the years the congregation has dwindled and services are no longer held there on a

regular basis. However, there seems currently to be a resurgence of interest in Congregation Agudas Achim, bringing with it the hope that Newton’s oldest Jewish congregation may be on the point of once again playing its part in the life of the community.



Elmer Lippin
Courtesy Mr. Elmer
Lippin



Harry Roiter, c. 1920
Courtesy Mr. Harry
Roiter

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