

HOG RIVER JOURNAL

Making Their Presence Known

By Marsha Lotstein

Photos selected by Nancy O. Albert

All photos courtesy of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford

Hog River Journal Summer 2005

www.hogriver.org

This photo essay draws upon some of the iconic images of Jewish settlement in Hartford from the rich collection of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford. Jews appear to have been scarce in colonial Hartford : The earliest recorded mention of a Jew in the city, “David the Jew,” occurred in 1659, and vital records from 1667 note the presence of “Jacob the Jew,” a horse dealer. They continued to be a tiny minority in Hartford until the about the second quarter of the 19th century and were not permitted to openly worship, even after Congregationalism’s reign as the official religion of Connecticut ended in 1818.

A century later, though, Hartford had at least 13 Jewish congregations and synagogues. That growth was due in part to poor economic conditions in Europe, which prompted many German Jews to emigrate to U.S. cities, including Hartford , during the 1830s and 1840s. These early immigrants laid the foundation for what was to become, by the early 20 th century, the 15 th largest Jewish community in the United States .

Many of Hartford’s Jews worked first as peddlers and went on to open retail establishments. Records show the presence of Jewish tobacco growers, tailors, milliners, jewelers, and proprietors of clothing stores and shops specializing in “fancy goods.” The 1855 City Directory shows 13 of 17 clothing stores owned by Jews. The best known of these retailers was Gerson Fox (1811-1880), the founder of what became in the early 20 th century Hartford’s venerable G. Fox & Co-eventually the largest family-owned retail operation in the nation.

Jews in Hartford worshipped together informally until 1843, when a group of Jewish business leaders, Gerson Fox among them, pressured the Connecticut legislature to pass a special enactment stating “that Jews who may desire to unite and form religious societies shall have the same rights, powers and privileges which are given to Christians of every denomination.” Four years later, Congregation Beth Israel officially organized as the second Jewish congregation in Connecticut . (The first, Mishkin Israel, was established in New Haven in 1843.)

A second wave of Jews emigrated largely from Eastern Europe in the late 19 th century, and by 1920 Hartford’s Jewish population had risen to 18,000. Jews from Lithuania , Poland , and Russia outnumbered German Jews by five to one,

and Yiddish was more commonly spoken than German. New congregations formed in the city, organized according to their members' places of origin. These new immigrants also brought new skills: cabinet-maker Nathan Margolis, for instance, established the Margolis Cabinet Shop, renowned for its handmade period furniture reproductions, in the early 20th century.

As Hartford's immigrant Jews improved their economic status, they aimed their philanthropic efforts toward the Jewish community, forming religious, social, and charitable organizations composed of people from their own former European communities.

Mt. Sinai Hospital, the city's third general hospital, was established by the Jewish community in 1923, in part because Jewish physicians were not granted privileges at other hospitals, and in part because of such matters as Jewish patients' desire to maintain kosher diets while hospitalized.

After World War II, Jews began moving from the city to its northern and western suburbs. Whole congregations remained intact and built synagogues in their new neighborhoods. Today, there are no longer any synagogues in Hartford, and only a few hundred Jews live in the city. Yet the Jewish impact on Hartford can still be felt in the names that are woven into the fabric of the city's history: perhaps not "David the Jew," but G. Fox, Mt. Sinai Hospital and Margolis furniture.



Interior, Ados Israel Synagogue, Market Street, Hartford. Built in 1898; demolished 1963. According to Connecticut Jewish History (Vol. 1, #2), this was the second architecturally significant synagogue in Hartford (the first was Temple Beth Israel, see Destination, p. 38), built by newly arrived Eastern European Jews. The congregation formed in 1884. The architect was Irish immigrant Michael O'Donohue who specialized in the design of Catholic churches.



Berman Abrahams, Harnessmaking, Market Street , Hartford , c. 1900.



Many of Hartford's Jews began as peddlers then moved into retail establishments. Charles Street Chicken Market, Hartford , c. 1900-1910.



Cheap John's Clothing Store (Finkelstein's), State Street , Hartford , c. 1900.



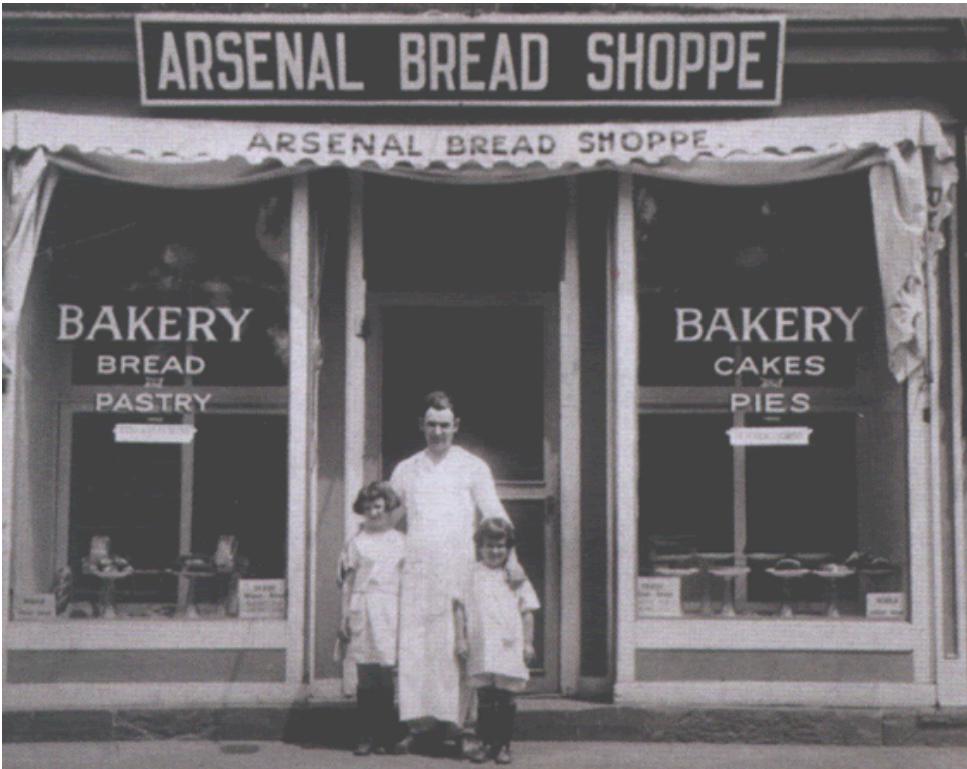
Harry & Rose Chinitz's grocery store, location unknown, 1932.



Rabbi performing the ritual slaughter of a chicken in the orthodox style, Charles Street, 1912.

Butchers, c. 1919. l-r: Hyman Beck, Dave Matts, Zady Kavitsky, Morris Liebert, Jake Brenner, Sam Smith; seated: Meyer Darefsky.





Arsenal Bake Shoppe, Harry Weinstein, proprietor, North Main Street , Hartford , c. 1923.



Cantarow's Pharmacy, Windsor Street, 1912. Pharmacist Joseph Cantarow is likely one of the figures out front.



Garden Street Synagogue choir, Reuben Rosenblatt, leader, c. 1936. Beth Hamedrash Hagodol, later known as the Garden Street Synagogue, was organized in 1905 on Hartford's East Side. After merging with another congregation, they moved to Garden Street in the city's North End in 1921, following their members who had migrated from the crowded tenements of the East Side to the more prosperous North End.



Sons & Daughters of Herzl, 1915.



Hadassah board members, 1930. Hartford's chapter of Hadassah, a women's organization interested in Zionism and social welfare, was founded in the 1910s and became one of the largest and most influential in the country.



Torah procession dedication, Knesset Israel Synagogue, Rockville and Enfield Streets, Hartford, 1947. According to Connecticut Jewish History, this congregation was formed in 1898 under the name Congregation Israel of Koretz because most of its members came from the city of Koretz in Russia. This was the last synagogue constructed in the city's North End.



Mount Sinai Hospital ward, Capitol Avenue , 1923. This photo was taken the year Mount Sinai opened, just one of many social and charitable organizations founded by the Jewish community in Hartford.



Chevry Lomdai Mishnayas, Bedford and Mather Streets, Hartford , built 1924-1926. This congregation, established in 1918, was also formed by Eastern European and Russian immigrants.

Marsha Lotstein is the recently retired executive director of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford . This essay is derived largely from Rabbi Morris Silverman's book *Jews in Hartford , 1659-1970* , published in 1970 by the Connecticut Historical Society.

