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The Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue National Historic Shrine

INCORPORATED

DEDICATED 1763

DESIGNATED NATIONAL HISTORIC SHRINE 1946

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Dear Friend:

As you are no doubt aware, the Touro Synagogue was designated a National Historic Site by the United States Government on March 5, 1946, the first Jewish house of worship to be so honored.

This historic shrine is now being maintained as a pilgrimage center, open to visitors throughout the year for guided tours. During the past few years almost 20,000 people have visited the Touro Synagogue and have been inspired by this sublime, religious experience.

Unfortunately, the honor conferred by the government carries no financial support. The small Jewish congregation of Newport is unable to assume the full financial responsibility of maintaining the structure and grounds as a National Shrine, as well as filling the requests for literature from libraries, schools and other interested groups.

We earnestly hope, therefore, that you will become a member of the Society, and so help to maintain the shrine which testifies eloquently to the historic roots of our faith, and of the Jew in the life of our great country.

Yours Sincerely,

Bernard C. Friedman

Dr. B. C. Friedman
President

NATIONAL SHRINE

TOURO SYNAGOGUE

DESIGNATED

NATIONAL HISTORIC SHRINE

MARCH 5, 1946

Cornerstone laid, 1759

Dedicated Dec. 2, 1763

NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue National Historic Shrine, Inc., in Newport, R. I.

HOME OF CONGREGATION JESHUAT ISRAEL

THE TOURO SYNAGOGUE is the first Jewish house of worship to be designated a National Historic Site by the National Parks Service of the Department of the Interior of the Federal Government. This fine Colonial structure has served the Jewish residents of Newport since 1763, but the founding of the Congregation Jeshuat Israel itself dates back to 1658. In that year some fifteen Jewish families seeking liberty came to Rhode Island in response to Roger Williams's declaration of religious freedom. For the next century, the Jewish settlers in Newport held religious services in private homes until December 2, 1763, when the Touro Synagogue, which had taken four years to build, was completed and dedicated to its holy purpose.

At the time of the dedication, the spiritual leader of the Congregation was the Reverend Isaac Touro, for whom the Synagogue was named. He was the father of Judah Touro, who became one of the great philanthropists of the United States. Judah Touro endowed the first free library on this continent, and probably in the world; he helped to complete the Bunker Hill monument, and he made many generous gifts, during his lifetime and in his will, to every type of charitable and welfare agency, without regard to creed or color. The Touro Infirmary, the famous hospital in New Orleans is named for him.

Judah Touro's remains are at rest beside his mother in the "Old Jewish Cemetery", a small burial ground just a little way up the street from the Touro Synagogue, at the corner of Touro and Kay Streets. This Cemetery is now fenced in by granite and iron. Many of the inscriptions on the tombstones, which had been written in Hebrew, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin, have been effaced by time, but the names of those who lie there were well-known in the early days of Rhode Island — names like Moses Michael Hays, Aaron Lopez, Benjamin Levy and Moses Seixas.

One of the greatest of American poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was moved by a visit to "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport" to write:

"How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves
Close by the street of this fair seaport town,
Silent beside the never-silent waves,
At rest in all this moving up and down!

And these sepulchral stones, so old and brown,
That pave with level flags their burial-place,
Seem like the tablets of the Law, thrown down
And broken by Moses at the mountain's base.

The very names recorded here are strange,
Of foreign accent, and of different climes;
Alvares and Rivera interchange
With Abraham and Jacob of old times."

Many eighteenth century members of Congregation Jeshuat Israel were prominent in the commercial, educational, and social life of the Colony. Many fought in the Revolutionary Army; many helped to further the Revolution in other ways. The Touro Synagogue and those who worshipped in it were an integral part of Colonial life. In 1780, the General Assembly of Rhode Island met in the Synagogue, and in March, 1781, when George Washington visited Newport, a Town Meeting was held in the same building.

Nine years later, in 1790, George Washington again visited Newport, this time as President of the United States. Moses Seixas, who was warden of the Synagogue at the time, addressed George Washington, and it was then that the first President made his famous declaration: "For happily, the Government of the United States which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."

When the Touro Synagogue was formally dedicated as a national shrine on August 31, 1947, a ceremony in which many nationally known Americans participated, President Truman sent the following message to Dr. Bernard C. Friedman, who was then president of Congregation Jeshuat Israel:

"I am happy to congratulate the Congregation Jeshuat Israel and the community of Newport, Rhode Island, on the setting apart of the Touro Synagogue as a national shrine. It is fortunate that the venerable fabric of the Synagogue, opened on December 2, 1763, a century after the founding of the Congregation, is still in use and admired by all lovers of good architecture.

"The setting apart of this historic shrine as a national monument is symbolic of our tradition of freedom, which has inspired men and women of every creed, race and ancestry to contribute their highest gifts to the development of our national culture.

"I trust that through long centuries to come the spirit of good will and tolerance will ever dominate the hearts and minds of the American people."

Carl Van Doren, the noted historian, acted as master of the official dedication ceremonies. In the following words, Mr. Van Doren gave expression to the full significance of the designation of the Touro Synagogue as a National Shrine:

> "Let us not forget that the shrines of a nation are the work not only of the good and brave men and women who are remembered, but also of the later generations who remember them and preserve the monuments which are their visible records. There can be no great nations without faithful memories of great deeds and great thoughts. If nations cherish unworthy memories from their past they will perform unworthy actions in the present and be satisfied with unworthy hopes for the future. But when, as this afternoon, a generation honors a shrine long consecrated to justice and holiness, that generation does honor to the best in itself as well as to the shrine. Those who here pay tribute to history now make further history, and become themselves a part of it."

ABOUT THE TOURO SYNAGOGUE

The architect of the Touro Synagogue, which is considered one of the most beautiful Colonial structures in the country, was Peter Harrison, who also designed the Redwood Library and the Brick Market in Newport, and other notable buildings of historic interest in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts. No small part of the Synagogue's austere classic beauty is due to the harmonious proportions of the edifice as a whole. The gallery is supported by twelve Ionic columns, and above these rise twelve Corinthian columns supporting the domed ceiling.

From the roof hang five massive bronze candelabra, wrought by hand. Two were the gift of Jacob Rodrigues Rivera in the name of his son Abraham, and bear the date 1765. Another, dated 1760, was presented by Napthali Hart Myers, and the fourth, the gift of Aaron Lopez, is dated 1770. The large candelabrum before the altar bears the inscription that it was the gift of Jacob Pollock in 1769.

In accordance with religious tradition the "perpetual lamp" with its eternal flame, hangs before the Ark. This lamp is inscribed as being the gift of Samuel Judah, in the year 1765. The beautiful standard brass candelabra upon the rail before the Ark bear the inscription, Enoch Lyon, 1766.

The clock on the balcony is inscribed "Judah Jacobs, London, Anno Mundi 5529", (1769).

The Scrolls of the Law within the Ark are of great antiquity, and of great beauty. One of them is four hundred years old and was brought to Newport by the families who first arrived in 1658. The silver tops and bells on the others are fine examples of the art of American silversmiths in the eighteenth century.

The Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue National Historic Shrine, Inc. was chartered in the State of Rhode Island on February 26, 1948, for the purpose of enlisting public support in maintaining the structure and grounds of the Touro Synagogue as a pilgrimage center, open to visitors throughout the year; making available educational material to schools, libraries, church and civic groups, as well as visitors; and the eventual building of a museum to house the priceless gifts of manuscripts, paintings, and other treasures associated with the early congregants, that are coming in from many parts of the country.

The Synagogue remains open for services as before. In addition to this there is now on duty a full time guide with regular hours for visitors. Recognition of the building as a National Shrine carries with it no financial aid and adds financial burdens far beyond the ability of this small community to assume. The cost of maintenance must therefore come from friends who are interested in the welfare of this beautiful house of worship.