

The History of Ahavas Achim Synagogue



The Founding of the Jewish Community in Newburyport

Congregation Ahavas Achim (Brotherly Love, in English), founded in 1896, is one of the oldest Jewish congregations in Massachusetts, and, according to records, may be the oldest still in existence on the

North Shore that has not merged with other congregations.

It's not clear when the first Jews settled in Newburyport, but certainly beginning in the post-Civil-War era, there were small clusters of Jewish families in Newburyport who gathered in their homes to pray and mark Jewish holidays.

Most of them came from Eastern Europe, where they were urban artisans and tradesmen who left to escape the persecution of the pogroms and conscription into the Czarist Russian army. Many settled in Newburyport because, unlike other immigrants, they could not work in the factories of Lowell, Lawrence and Haverhill on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath.

Most of them lived in the Ferry Wharf area, along Water Street between Market Square and the area known as Joppa in Newburyport's south end. Some worked as peddlers, while others became shopkeepers and opened businesses, including kosher butcher shops, clothing stores, a food market, a maternity store and a drug store, among others, lining Pleasant and State streets.

By the 1870s, they were sufficiently well established to be elected to public office, and on August 3, 1896, 17 members of Newburyport's Jewish community were granted a charter by the Commonwealth establishing Congregation Ahavas Achim as a non-profit religious organization.

The Synagogue's various Buildings

Initially, the community worshiped in a rented room in Market Square. They also gathered at the Old Central Music Hall, at 31 Pleasant Street, where their first Hebrew School opened in 1902.

In 1907, they purchased a house at 41 Liberty Street. As the story goes, the owner of the building knew that the congregation wanted to buy it and did not want to sell it to them, so he arranged the auction to be held on Saturday, so that they



could not bid on it because they would be observing their sabbath. A gentile member of the community found this distasteful and went to the auction and bought it; on the following Monday, he sold it to representatives of the Jewish community.

The Liberty Street synagogue included not only the sanctuary, but a women's Mikvah and living quarters for the first rabbi, Joshua B. Saklad, who was also a butcher.

The Current Building at 53 Washington Street

On September 10, 1933, the community purchased their current building on Washington and Olive Streets when the Methodist church that had occupied it merged with another congregation. As The Daily News reported: "It was a big day for the Jewish people of Newburyport and was the result of many years. It was estimated that over 700 members of the Jewish faith attended the opening ceremonies, plus hundreds more came to extend their best wishes."

The synagogue's original charter is proudly displayed on a wall outside the sanctuary on the second floor of the building.