

The First Cemetery – a Short History

This description is summarized from The First Cemetery, a booklet compiled by Rev. L H. Elmaleh and J. Bunford Samuel; Revised and Enlarged by Rev. Leon H. Elmaleh - May 1906 and printed by Congregation Mikveh Israel about the cemetery located at Ninth and Spruce Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Overview

Many prominent and patriotic American Jews are buried in the historic cemetery of Congregation Mikveh Israel on Spruce Street between Eighth and Ninth Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. One of the most prominent, brave and devoted patriots to be buried at the cemetery is Haym Salomon, whose gave financial support of the Revolutionary War for the cause of freedom.

The First Cemetery is the oldest Jewish cemetery in Pennsylvania and the third oldest in the United States. In 1740, records show that Nathan Levy applied to John Penn, Chief of the Proprietary Government of Pennsylvania, for 30 feet square for a burial ground. In 1752, a plot of 30 x 60 feet adjoining the first plot, was added. Mr. Levy paid 5 shillings a year for the annual tax.

The cemetery was often desecrated, as noted in an article in the Philadelphia Gazette on September 12, 1751, and a wall was built to protect it.

On June 21, 1765, John Penn granted the congregation more land for the burial of Matthias Bush, a member of the congregation. A plan was drawn on October 31, 1765 when it was surveyed. In November 1791, the congregation appointed a committee to oversee the cemetery.

It appears from documentation that Mr. Levy and Mr. Bush purchased the land for a family cemetery, as well as for other Jews. After their death, their heirs questioned the right of ownership. The question was settled on April 14, 1828 by the Pennsylvania State legislature, giving the rights to the cemetery to Congregation Mikveh Israel. The names of the four trustees were listed.

In 1953, the City of Philadelphia declared the cemetery a historic site and allocated funds for its maintenance, improvement and preservation.

The cemetery was listed as a National Historical site in 1956 and is located within Independence National Historical Park.

The Internments

The searchable database of the First Cemetery was completed by Sephardic Heritage Project, Inc, a nonprofit organization dedicated to obtaining genealogical records, in cooperation with Rabbi Albert Gabbai, spiritual leader of Congregation Mikveh Israel. November 2019. Each entry listed is based on the booklet compiled by Rev. L H. Elmaleh and J. Bunford Samuel; Revised and Enlarged by Rev. Leon H. Elmaleh (May 1906). The page number of each entry is listed along with an image of the page for reference purposes.

Sephardic Heritage Project looked up the Hebrew dates for each burial. It could not account for whether the death occurred before or after sundown, so the Hebrew dates are approximate.

Sephardic Heritage Project thanks Rabbi Gabbai and Congregation Mikveh Israel for their support.