

**Congregation:** Temple Beth-El

**Location:** 950 W Main Street

Rock Hill, SC 29730

**Year Built:** 1940-1941

**Years Active:** 1940-1963

**Architect:** Unknown

**Congregation History:**

Establishment of the Synagogue

# It Began with a Phone Call

by Rachel G. Barnett, Executive Director

A phone call and an email set in motion a chain of events that led to a grand mitzvah. On April 30, 2021, Gary Kramer, originally from Whiteville, North Carolina, left a voice message for Jewish Heritage Collection (JHC) curator Dale Rosengarten asking for advice: what could be done with a memorial tablet from Temple Beth El in Rock Hill, South Carolina, that had been stored at Beth Israel in Whiteville since 1963, the year Beth El closed its doors? “We are looking to place this piece of South Carolina Jewish history in a respectful manner,” he wrote in a follow-up email. Dale immediately referred him to me.

How the sparsely populated plaque marking the *yahrzeit*, or anniversary of death, of 13 former Rock Hill residents had come to Whiteville became clear later, but with Beth Israel disbanding and selling its building, the first order of business was to find the tablet a home.

Dale sent me a list of contacts in Rock Hill, including several people interviewed for JHC in 1999, and the group began firing off emails and bringing others into the conversation. I just managed to keep up as the Rock Hill natives proposed ideas. Harriet Goode suggested as a resting place the Jewish section established in 1983 in Forest Hills Cemetery. She also mentioned a Friedheim family burial ground in Laurelwood Cemetery. We reached out to Noah Levine of the Jewish Legacy Project to ask if he knew of any “out of the box” options for the disposition of memorial plaques. He sent photos of a small building on the site of a Jewish cemetery in Messen, Pennsylvania, and a plan was hatched.

Gerry Schapiro, who has lived in Rock Hill more than 50 years and originally hails from New York, called to discuss creating a small structure like the one in Messen but soon came up with a better solution. The City of Rock Hill owns a multi-purpose building adjacent to Laurelwood Cemetery. Gerry met with the Rock Hill City Manager and secured permission to hang the plaque on a wall in the building. A dozen or so emails later, the crated tablet was on its way back to Rock Hill.

Meanwhile, I learned that when Beth El closed, the synagogue was sold to the Mormons who later sold it to an AME church. The building is standing—I was able to snag a Google photo of it—and with the help of local historian Paul Gettys, we are now researching the congregation’s history for JHSSC’s *Documenting South Carolina’s Synagogues* project.

The Society’s stewardship succeeded in repatriating the Rock Hill memorial tablet and opened a new avenue of activity for us—the preservation of objects orphaned when synagogues close or stores go out of business. We are fortunate to have Pillars and members whose financial support enables us to assist when such situations occur, and to be associated with organizations that can provide guidance and research assistance.

So why did the plaque go to Whiteville? One explanation involves family connections between Rock Hill and Whiteville. Another is the circuit-riding rabbi program, funded by Charlotte businessman and inventor I. D. Blumenthal, whose route included both towns.

Temple Beth-El was established in Rock Hill, South Carolina in 1940. The Hebrew Men's Club (est. 1939) wanted to build a synagogue and commissioned the construction of the temple that same year. Prior to 1940, many Jewish families traveled to nearby North Carolina for shabbat and high holiday services.<sup>1</sup> Sol Aberman, who would later become president of the congregation, and his business partner, J. Reuben Anderson, sold the lot for the building to Bessie S. Aberman, Sol Aberman's wife.<sup>2</sup> Sol Aberman assumed a leading role in the community, including President of Temple Beth-El. His son, Eddie Aberman, recalls, "He was always president and he always dictated what everybody should do... He was the one that arranged for us to have a place of worship. He was the one that arranged for the temple to be built and paid most of the money. He was the one that would arrange to get the student rabbis for the holidays, and he would arrange to put on the functions and so forth at the synagogue."<sup>3</sup>

The purposes and by-laws set forth in March of 1941 when the synagogue opened were also similar to those for the Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim synagogue in Charleston, SC. They stated as follows: "The divine services of this congregation are to be conducted to strengthen a loyalty to the Torah; to further the observance of the Sabbath and the festivals; to preserve the traditional character of the Liturgy; to foster Jewish life in the Homeland, and to perpetuate Judaism."<sup>4</sup> The synagogue served the eighteen Jewish families of Rock Hill, which included the Abermans, Arculis, the Kurtzs, Suritzs, Bakers, Baruchs, Frohmans, Franks, Goodmans, Leaders, Rosoffs, Springers, Segals, Troutmans, Dresners, Samets, Suraskys, and the Wards. The first High Holy Day services at the synagogue were conducted by Rabbi Telsner.

On February 10, 1940, Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, granted a charter to the women members of the Rock Hill congregation. The first meeting was held at the home of Mrs. Ben Kurtz on Eden Terrace. While Hadassah National required a minimum of 15

members, the four original members of Rock Hill's Hadassah, Mrs. Ben Kurts, Mrs. Mac Goodman, Mrs. Ben Leader, and Mrs. Sidney Springer found a loophole: by simply paying the dues for 15 members, they were able to establish a local chapter with only four.<sup>5</sup> While Rock Hill's Hadassah chapter was the smallest in terms of membership, over the years it earned a reputation of making more charitable contributions than other chapters in cities four times the size of Rock Hill.<sup>6</sup>

By 1952, membership in the Rock Hill chapter had increase to 17.

### Rock Hill's Traveling Rabbi

Prior to 1953, High Holy Day services were conducted by Rabbis from the Jewish Theological Seminary and Yeshiva University in New York. While Rock Hill had an adequate building, the community was still too small to support a full-time rabbi. Members of Beth-El decided to experiment with a circuit riding rabbi. Beth-El President Sol Aberman invited Rabbi Harold A. Friedman (1917-1997), a traveling rabbi, to conduct services in Rock Hill.

Rabbi Friedman traveled by car and trailer to assist ten other communities in the Carolina Piedmont that lacked a spiritual leader.<sup>7</sup> His trailer was equipped with everything he might need for both services and educational purposes, including desks, blackboards, projection machines, maps, a record player, and a plethora of books on Jewish texts. He also brought with him a portable ark complete with a Torah.<sup>8</sup> If needed, services could be held in his trailer. Other times, he brought his collection of Judaica into private homes for special services. Friedman even had a battery-powered eternal light.<sup>9</sup> The rabbi's services cost the Rock Hill community about \$10,000/year, a sizable sum for such a small community.

At the time, Rabbi Friedman was the only circuit riding rabbi in the United States, the traveling rabbi program having been established by I.D. Blumenthal of Charlotte, NC in 1953.

Rabbi Friedman began officially serving the Rock Hill community in August of 1954 and would remain in that capacity until July 1956. Twice a month, he would travel to Rock Hill to deliver Shabbat services and conduct a Sunday School at 10 a.m.<sup>10</sup> In 1955, he and his wife moved from Statesville, NC to Rock Hill to be closer to the congregation, though he continued to serve the other nine congregations in North Carolina.<sup>11</sup> Friedman travelled a 1,200-mile circuit every two weeks, providing religious services for ten different communities of approximately 300 families.<sup>12</sup> Over time, Rabbi Freidman began to earn widespread acclaim for his work. He was featured in a LIFE Magazine article in September of 1955 titled “Traveling Synagogue,” as well as several newsreels, including NBC’s ‘Eternal Light’ program, (1956), CBS’s ‘The American Jew’ (1958), and even a short televised film made by Walt Disney Productions (1955).<sup>13</sup>

### From Synagogue to Temple to Church

Throughout the course of the 1950s, participation in the Rock Hill congregation began to decline, and they could no longer support a physical synagogue. With only six remaining families, it was no longer possible to form a minyan, let alone cover the expenses of a building. In July of 1963, the Rock Hill Hebrew Congregation, Inc. sold the property to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and the building was converted into a Mormon Temple.<sup>14</sup> Proceeds from the sale were donated to a local charity.<sup>15</sup> The former synagogue would change religious hands two more times: first to the West Side Church of God in 1982, and then to the Adams Chapel AME Church in 2000.<sup>16</sup> Presently, the building remains an AME Church.

The religious evolution of the building exemplifies the changing demographic of Rock Hill. Despite the loss of their physical structure, the Rock Hill Jewish community has remained

committed to their faith and to one another.<sup>17</sup> In 1983, City Councilwoman Betty Jo Rhea made a motion to the Rock Hill Planning Commission to authorize the establishment of a Hebrew section at Forest Hills Cemetery. The resolution passed unanimously.<sup>18</sup> Today, Jews living in Rock Hill attend services elsewhere, often traveling to Temple Beth-El and Temple Israel in Charlotte, NC or Temple Emanuel in Gastonia, NC.<sup>19</sup>

### Temple Beth El's Memorial Plaque

In April of 2021, a memorial plaque inscribed with the names of thirteen former Temple Beth-El congregants that once hung in Temple Beth-El was discovered at Beth Israel in Whiteville, NC. Rock Hill community leader Gerry Schapiro made arrangements for the memorial plaque to be placed in a city building that stands adjacent to the Laurelwood cemetery in Rock Hill. The plaque was unveiled during a small ceremony on August 16, 2021, that included the Rock Hill's current mayor and several former members of the original Temple Beth-El Synagogue in Rock Hill.

### **Architectural Description:**

Temple Beth-El in Rock Hill, SC is a one-story, three-bay wide structure built in the American Vernacular style using machine-made brick in the common brick bond. There are many influences from other 20th century architectural styles present in the building's design, such as Romanesque, Moorish Revival, and even Art Deco. The front-gabled roof features a pointed parapet facade with quoins and a corbelled cornice. Originally, a Star of David was positioned at the top of the pediment, but as the building no longer serves as a synagogue, the Star of David has been removed. A brick belt course separates the roof pediment from the first story. Above each of the windows is a diamond-shaped decorative brick panel. The windows are

1-over-1 single-sash windows with arched transoms and a brick sill. The front entry has a double-leaf door and a brick pediment above the door. The structure is built on a raised basement. A small landing and ten brick steps lead to the ground level at the front entry. The landing and the staircase have an iron balustrade. On the southwest corner of the building is an open arched entryway that leads to a staircase to the basement. On the west facade of the building, a wooden wheelchair access ramp has recently been built.

# Endnotes

1. "R.H. Synagogue Replica of One in Charleston." *Evening Herald, The* (Rock Hill, SC), May 3, 1952.
2. York County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 96 p. 111, York County, SC.
3. Oral History with Edward Aberman, 1999 September 23, in person interview by the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina, College of Charleston Special Collections, Charleston, SC.
4. "R.H. Synagogue Replica of One in Charleston." *Evening Herald, The* (Rock Hill, SC), May 3, 1952.
5. "Hadassah Group is Among Most Active in State." *Evening Herald, The* (Rock Hill, SC), May 3, 1952.
6. *ibid.*
7. "Circuit-Riding Rabbi to Serve RH Jewish Group." *Herald, The* (Rock Hill, SC), September 24, 1953.
8. *ibid.*
9. "Traveling Synagogue." *LIFE Magazine*, September 19, 1955.
10. "Jewish Spiritual Home." *Evening Herald, The* (Rock Hill, SC), March 5, 1955.
11. "Rabbi and Mrs. Friedman Move to Rock Hill." *Evening Herald, The* (Rock Hill, SC), July 13, 1955.
12. "Traveling Synagogue." *LIFE Magazine*, September 19, 1955.
13. Milligan, Amy K. "The 'Jewish Zealots of Tobacco Land': The Circuit Riding Rabbi Project's Impact on Small Town Jews in North Carolina, 1950–1980." *Jewish Culture and History* 20, no. 1 (2018). 69.
14. York County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 313 p. 423, York County, SC.
15. Oral History with Edward Aberman, 1999 September 23, in person interview by the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina, College of Charleston Special Collections, Charleston, SC.
16. York County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 658 p. 347, York County, SC; York County Register of Deeds, Deed Book 3119 p. 199, York County, SC.
17. Oral History with Edward Aberman, 1999 September 23, in person interview by the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina, College of Charleston Special Collections, Charleston, SC.
18. Resolution authorizing establishment of a Hebrew cemetery of Rock Hill pp. 68-69.
19. Barkley, Barbara. "A variety of worship styles can be found here." *Herald, The* (Rock Hill, SC), February 18, 2005: 52E. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*.
20. Oral History with Edward Aberman, 1999 September 23, in person interview by the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina, College of Charleston Special Collections, Charleston, SC.