



Welcome to the St. Thomas Synagogue's Weibel Memorial Museum

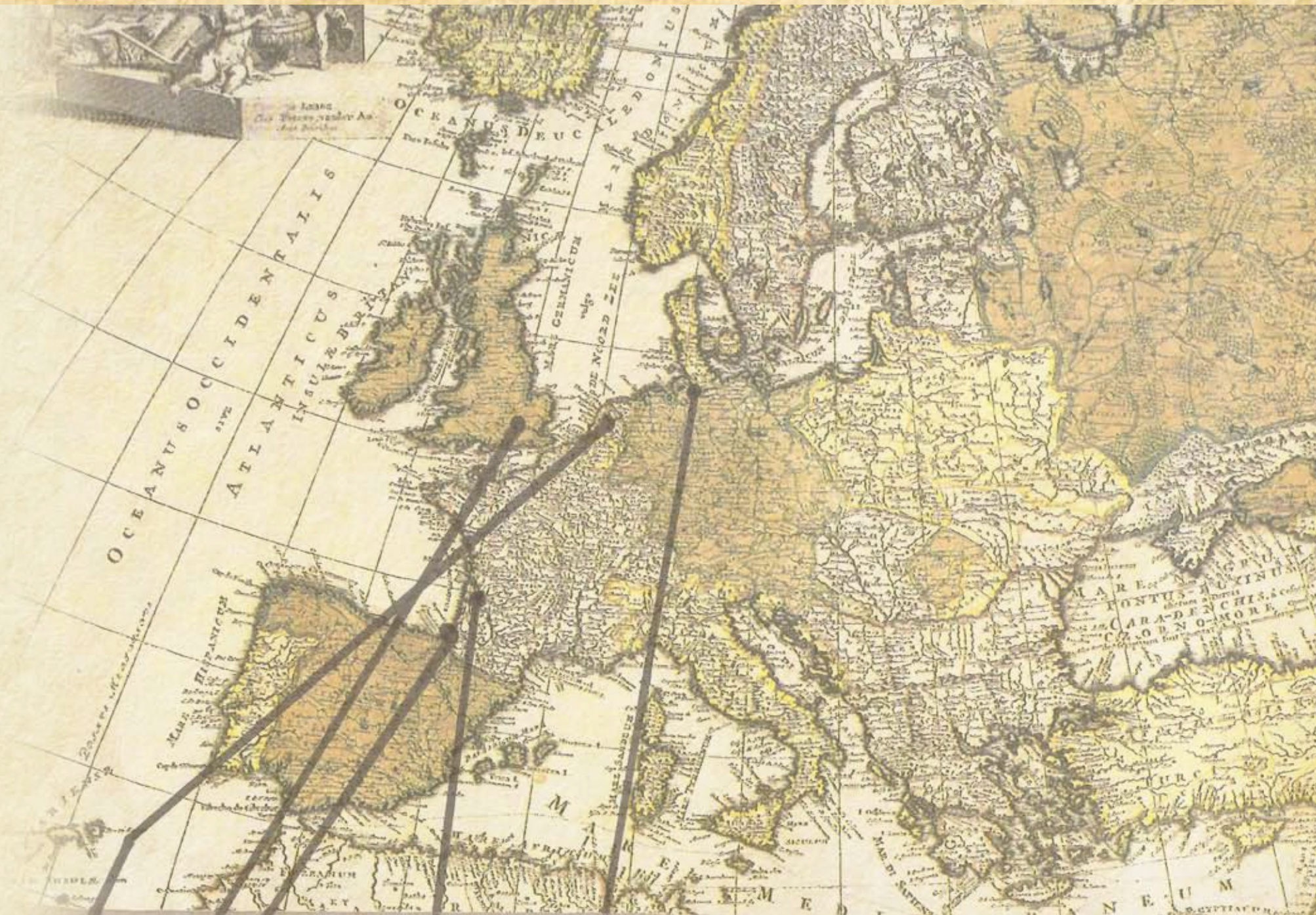
“The Synagogue of St. Thomas, rebuilt in 1833 after fire destroyed an older structure, is today one of the most charming sights of the Island, and an important architectural monument of the Jewish people in the New World. Visitors of all faiths experience a moment of awe at the sight of the austere Sephardic interior, the heavy hurricane-proof walls, the vaulted windows and the sand-covered floor...

In the great surge to the Caribbean following World War II, the Jewish community has come strongly to life on St. Thomas. The voices of children studying Hebrew are heard once more on Synagogue Hill. Here as everywhere else, there is a revival of Jewish spirit and learning; largely inspired, here as everywhere, by the rebirth of the Jewish State in Israel.”

- Herman Wouk

A Short History of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, 1983

BEGINNINGS

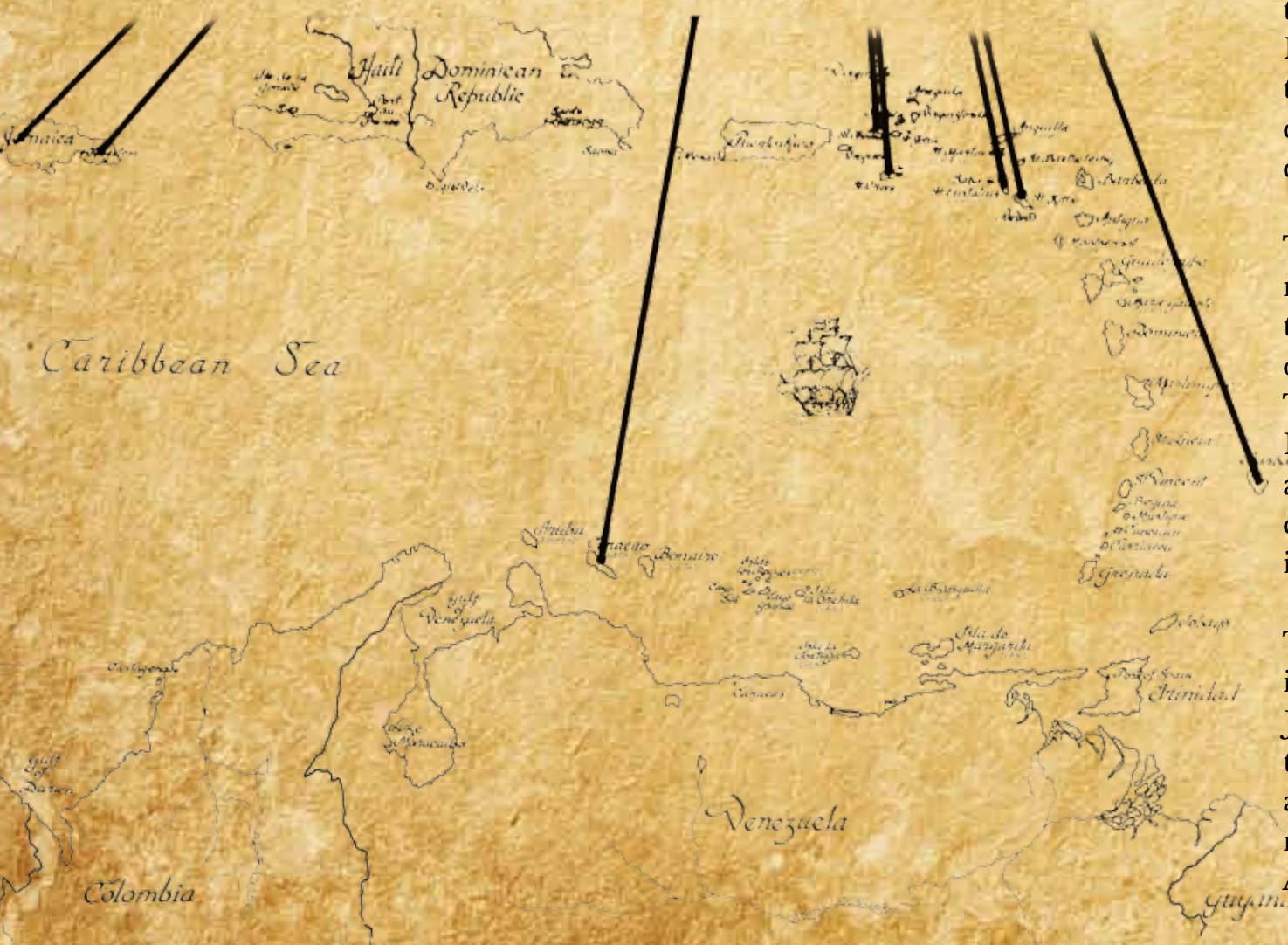


Caribbean Jews in the 1600's

The first Jews in the Caribbean were of Sephardic, or Spanish-Portuguese, descent. Victims of the expulsions of 1492 and 1497, these Jews settled in cities like Bordeaux, Bayonne, Hamburg, and Amsterdam. Over the next centuries, partially as a result of discrimination in other professions, they developed a strong mercantile trade.

The colonization in the Caribbean opened new opportunities for them, often without the bias they faced in Europe, and a number of Jews took advantage of the situation. They settled in places like Brazil, Curaçao, Barbados, Nevis, St. Eustatius, St. Croix, and, of course, St. Thomas, forming trading companies and working to turn the islands into habitable colonies.

The island of St. Thomas was officially settled in 1665. There is documentary evidence that Jews lived here from that time, having come to the island as shop owners, ship chandlers and brokers, entrepreneurs in sugar, rum, and molasses and traders between Europe and the American colonies.





Early Jewry on St. Thomas 1672-1781

The Jewish population of St. Thomas and St. Croix was very small during the first century of colonization. Once in a while, however, certain Jews would achieve specific recognition. One of the wildest and most famous was Gabriel Milan, who was appointed governor of the Danish West Indies in 1684 by King Christian V of Denmark. Over the next three years, he became a tyrant, terrorized the population, went mad, and stood up (unsuccessfully) to an army of warships sent to bring him back to Europe. In 1687, a court in Copenhagen found Milan guilty of treason, and he was decapitated two years later.

Most other Jews at the time led even, productive lives, usually in trade. Occasionally the local paper would cover a story about a Jewish resident, or run ads placed by Jewish families. However the tiny Jewish community did not figure prominently in general goings-on of the Virgin Islands.

Did the Jews of the Virgin Islands trade slaves? In the 1600's and 1700's, slave trading became a fashionable industry in Europe and the Americas. The Virgin Islands, as a major port area, served as a gateway for some of these slaves. However, their involvement was minimal – the Virgin Islands imported less than 0.1% of all the slaves brought to the Caribbean – and the Danish government officially eliminated the Virgin Islands slave trade in 1803. (Emancipation, though, did not come until 1848.)

It is likely that the ranks of those who traded slaves during this time included some Jews. There is no evidence, on the other hand, that the Jews took any sort of a disproportionate role in the industry. Thus, while it is wrong to leave the Jews out of this period of inhumanity, it is no better to give them any greater responsibility for a phenomenon propagated by African and European society alike.

Christian

G. Milan

1781-1796

The St. Thomas Jewish Community Finds a Synagogue

With Permission and by Authority of the Honourable Frederick Balthenson von Mahlenfels, Lieutenant Colonel of Infantry and Commandant of St. Thomas and St. Johns in America.

By Law for the more Effectual Government of the Synagogue Named Blessing & Peace Established in this Island under the protection above mentioned vizt.

*Art. 1
The Mahamad, or standing Council shall be composed of a President and Treasurer and the Adjuntos or Wardens shall consist of at least five Members, which in the whole form a Council of Seven.*

*Art. 2
On every new year their shall be a President and Treasurer Elected, and His Honour the Commandant shall be duly informed of said Election.*

*Art. 3
The Mahamad shall not be composed of Persons Allied by consanguinity or Affinity.*

*Art. 4
The New Elected Mahamad on the first meeting after their Installation shall make oath to Administer Justice in all Matters that may come before them Impartially.*

*Art. 5
Fourteen Days before Noon Year the Election of President and Treasurer shall be proclaimed in Synagogue, and should the persons Elected, refuse accepting, they shall each be condemned in Five + Twenty Pieces of Eight Penalty and Two others shall be Elected, who shall be proclaimed Eight Days before Noon Year + if they also refuse, they shall be subject to a like penalty in which case the Mahamad + Adjuntos shall draw lots among themselves, + those on whom the lots falls shall be obliged to serve.*

*Art. 6
Fourteen Days before New Year there shall be Two Bridewomen of the Law appointed + which Election shall be Conducted as in the preceding Article except the fine -- which shall be only one poe.*

*Art. 7
The Persons once Elected and served their time or paid their fine shall not be re-Elected for Two years after.*

*Art. 8
The Treasurer at his Resigning shall lay the Books and Papers of the Synagogue before the Adjunto, with an exact Acct. of all Expenditures + etc [etc.] during his Administration for their Inspection and whatever Balance may be in favor of the Synagogue, he shall lay before them, so as to be ready to deliver the same to the New Elected Treasurer.*

*Art. 9
That the Treasurer shall keep the Books of the Synagogue, he shall also record every motion and Debate that passes in the Adjuntos + finally to do all the writing Business, that in any manner whatever concerns the Synagogue.*

*Art. 10
The Treasurer shall be obliged if any Person is sick who may crave the Assistance of Doctors [or charity] to visit them Twice a Week, or oftner if the Case requires it, to see that the Doctor*

employed by the Synagogue pays them due Attendance, + that their other wants are supplied, + should he find their case requires an Extra ordinary assistance, beyond his limits, he shall Immediately inform the President who shall assemble the Adjuntos.

*Art. 11
Should the Doctor Employed by the Synagogue not attend the Poor who are provided with a Note from the Treasurer, he shall make the President acquainted with the same, + they shall see that Grievance redressed.*

*Art. 12
In Synagogue during service their shall be all Decency and Decorum observed by the Congregation, that due respect shall be paid the orders of the Acting President solely or the Mahamad in Conjunction, + no Person or Persons whatever shall be permitted to contradict his or their orders, under penalty of four Dollars, + such offender or offenders shall be ordered immediately to quit the Synagogue for the better preservation of Peace + Tranquility amongst the Congregation, + should such offender or offenders refuse quitting, the President of Mahamad, shall immediately apply to his Honor the Commandant, for his Assistance against him or them, as public Disturbors of the Peace and Tranquility Existing amongst us.*

*Art. 13
Should any Congregator consider himself ill treated by the President or Mahamad in Synagogue, he shall not oppose his or their orders there, but shall Patiently wait until the next day [if not Sabbath or Holy Day] + demand an Adjunto or Assembly of the Wardens from the President, + which shall not be refused him, and their in Ample form state his complaint or Grievance, + if the Adjunto, find the Mahamad jointly or either separately in fault, they shall condemn the offender or offenders, each in a fine not Exceeding Five + Twenty pieces of Eight.*

*Art. 14
Should the President at any time whatever find it necessary to Summons any Person or Persons of the Jewish Religion to appear at an Adjunto, + him or them refuse [dico?] obedience to his summons, without Assigning such reason or reasons as may be deemed Satisfactory they shall for the first time be condemned in a fine of Two Dollars, for the second summons four Dollars, + for the third and last time the Mahamad shall apply to his Honor the Commandant + acquaint him with their reasons for having summonsed such Person or Persons requesting his Honor to order them to appear.*

*Art. 15
That no person of our Religion in the Island shall by any means whatever Insult, offend or ill treat our Samas, or Sectors, when he goes to them, with any message or to Execute any orders given him by the Mahamad or Adjuntos, under Penalty of four Dollars for every offence.*

*Art. 16th
That all free will offerings made to the Synagogue shall be considered as liable to Especial Courts, + shall be paid Monthly.*

*Art. 17th
The Treasurer shall be obliged Monthly to draw out + Render by the Samas or Sectors the acct of every Individual that may be indebted to the Synagogue, + if any person or persons should be backward in discharging the same, our said Treasurer is hereby investid with full Authority to enforce payment by Law, according to the Preceding Article.*

Art. 18th

Every person called up to the five Book Moses shall be compelled at least to offer one half royal for the President + congregation. Nor shall any Person refuse a Missa or Function given them by the President when in Synagogue under Penalty of pt. 12. + at same time quit the Synagogue.

*Art. 19th
The Treasurer shall be allowed to dispose of Pt. 12. + for any Charitable use without consulting the Adjunto, but for any greater sum, he shall first consult + obtain their Approbation.*

*Art. 20
The Treasurer at his resigning shall Publish in the Synagogue an Exact Acct. Current of his Transactions during his Administration, that the Congregation at large may be acquainted with the use that has been made of the Synagogues Money + the state of the Synagogues Finances.*

*Art. 21
That every Individual of our Nation who may stand in need of the Doctor employed by the Synagogue shall apply to the Treasurer for a Note to him, as he will attend none without such a Note.*

*Art. 22
Fourteen days before Passover every poor person of our Nation that may stand in need of unincensed Bread from the Synagogue shall give in their Names with the Number of their Family, to the Treasurer for his Government of making the necessary Provisions.*

*Art. 23
En Virtude Serem os membros actuaes Primeiros que Montarao as Establecimento de hua publica Synagoga em esta Jaha + havendo ja [sa?] successivamente construido tao longe com asperso de poder Edificar hua, consequentemente Suplicao que si algum [algum?] de nossa Religiao em esta Jaha, de [e]jajarem de Edificar hua auler de nos que nos cheu [?] seijo permitido amamos que seijo [amamos] Unido a nossa quando daremos Caudal que possui, as sepher (ou Cinco Livras de Mossah [?]) + mais ornamentos concernentes a Synagoga com ocausulo que Sera justificado de mesmo nome Baracha Vashalom, ou Banco + Paiz + que os actuaes adjuntos + membros serao Igualmente do nova Synagoga;*

*Art. 24
Que sy em algum tempo a Mahamad + adjuntos considerarem necessario de fazer algum acrescentamento ou augmentos nestes reglamentos opodrao fazelo, porom sem parte em Excusas [motus] que respectivamente Informem as honoravel Commandante obliaram Suas apraxicoas;*

*Art. 25
Que cada Rothasana (ou novos anno) + Passos Ester reglamentos + seos acrescentamentos Serao Leitais + Exijer Ignorancia.*

St. Thomas a 26 Setembro 1796 correspond a com 25 Elul 5556.

Adjuntos	Mossah Porosa
Jacob Garcia	Presidente
Gomoy Silva	Samuel Akah
Benjamin Akah	Gahay
Nissim Finis	
Jacob Semak de Valencia.	

It is the peculiar happiness of the British constitution, to preserve the principles of religion, to their own sentiments of religion are not inconsistent with the government, and it is the peculiar happiness of a nation to say, that their religion, and obedience, to the government, shall be preserved a peaceful and obedient people, and a firm attachment to the King, and a firm obedience to the laws and constitution of the country.

The Island got its first infusion of Jewish settlers during the American Revolution. The British Navy stationed a blockade along the Atlantic coast to thwart the American Revolutionaries. However, the Dutch on the Island of St. Eustatius, then a major port with a large Jewish mercantile community, had little love for the British and much sympathy for the American Revolutionaries. They helped them with arms and ammunition.

In 1781, British Admiral George Rodney besieged St. Eustatius. Dubious from the start, the siege lasted several months and resulted in the permanent destruction of the island's welfare. The Jews took the brunt of the blame, and many families were deported or forced to flee. Over the following decades, a number of these merchants decided to make their new homes in the Virgin Islands. This, along with other emigration from Curaçao and Europe, probably marked the start of the expansion and organization of the Jewish communities of the Virgin Islands. By 1784, St. Croix had a functioning synagogue and St. Thomas followed suit soon afterward.

Notice.

THE Subscriber has the honor of informing the Public, that he has for a very long time transacting business with Messrs. C. & L. LOPES DUBOIS from whom he solicited for a long time a settlement of accounts which he could not obtain;—he then saw no alternative but to call them to the Siding Court, which he did on the 1st of August last, when he could not obtain any settlement he put his papers in the hands of Lawyer PORTH, who solicited them to appear before the Siding Court tomorrow, but Mr. C. L. LOPES DUBOIS prevented the same, causing the said Messrs. C. & L. LOPES DUBOIS to be imprisoned for an Ounce of the said Widow, amounting to £1000—thus that Messrs. C. & L. LOPES DUBOIS & Co. show their gratitude to an unfortunate man, who sacrificed the greater part of his time and even his life in their service; this is proved by documents in his possession.

St. Thomas, 7th Sept 1826.
M. RODRIGUEZ

Charite.

MONSIEUR LOPES DUBOIS a déposé ce-jour entre mes mains en ma qualité de trésorier des Pauvres Israélites, la somme de quatre Gourdes pour une expertise qui lui a été refusée et qui a été obtenue avec les frais, de l'autorité de la pétente.

St. Thomas le 22 Nov. 1825.
M. PRETTO

ST. THOMAS, APRIL 13, 1831.
IT is with deep regret that we this day announce the death of M. E. SARQUY, Esq. Son of M. SARQUY, Esq., of this Island. This young Gentleman proceeded a short time ago to Marseilles for mercantile affairs, and while bathing in the sea at that place he unfortunately went out of his depth before assistance could be procured, was drowned. His mortal remains arrived here this morning and were immediately placed at the disposal of his parents.—The many virtuous and amiable qualities possessed by the deceased are so well known and appreciated by the Community at large, that it is superfluous in us to attempt to eulogize his untimely fate has caused deep regret to his solitary parents, a numerous circle of friends, and those who had the pleasure of his acquaintance,

PERSONS desirous of Contracting for the Buildings to be erected on the Hebrew Burial Ground, will please apply to the Subscriber, with whom the plans are deposited.

St. Thomas, 21st June, 1825,
J. WOOD

1796-1831 Expansion I

The ensuing years brought huge growth to the Jewish community. A number of new names sprang up in the papers, as more Jewish families came to the island. Our cemeteries tell the story. Graves of Sephardic Jews and kin bear names like Azevedo, Benjamin, Cardoze, De Castro, Da Costa, Pereira, Piza, Robles, Sasso, Toledano, Valencia, and others. They set up their businesses in a climate of great tolerance, experiencing little discrimination from the government.

In 1796 the Jews of St. Thomas founded this congregation and called it "Blessing and Peace" (B'racha v'shalom). Only nine Jewish families belonged to the congregation in 1801. In 1803, however, it increased to 22. In 1804, the small wooden synagogue was destroyed by fire, as well as hundreds of other buildings on St. Thomas. In 1812, the Jewish community purchased land and built a new synagogue. The congregation continued to grow and in 1823 the building was dismantled and a larger one erected and renamed "Blessing and Peace and Loving Deeds" (B'racha v'shalom u'gemilut hasadim), the name it carries today.

On Old Year's Night (December 31) 1831, a fire broke out in the home of a Spanish merchant, and spread quickly through the town of Charlotte Amalie. Despite the best efforts of the island firefighters and local community, the synagogue could not be saved. Overall, the blaze destroyed over a quarter of the island's buildings. At the start of the New Year 1832, the Jewish community was homeless.

For Sale.
The valuable and well assorted Stock of Hardware &c., belonging to the Estate of the late Mr. M. DELVILLE, is offered for sale by private contract, at a very low valuation, and payable by instalments (with interest) in Two, Three, Four and Five Years, provided application be made to either of the undersigned prior to 1st prox., when it will be realized by Public Auction, if not previously disposed of.

An Inventory and the Goods are open for inspection, and may be seen on applying to Mr. Pissarro.
St. Thomas, 19th February 1841.
H W PRECHT }
Wm. GIBSON } Executors.
F PISSARRO }

A Vendre.
Le fond du magasin appartenant à la succession de feu M. DELVILLE, composé d'un superbe assortiment d'objets de

Quincaillerie,
à un prix très modéré, payable (avec intérêts) dans Deux, Trois, Quatre et Cinq Ans.
S'adresser à l'un des soussignés avant le 1er du mois prochain. Dans le cas où il ne se présenterait pas d'acquéreur avant l'expiration de l'époque désignée,

DIED:
Thursday night last, JOSEPH D. LEVY Esquire, a native of Bordeaux in France, aged 76 years, deeply lamented by those who knew him.—His remains were carried to the place of interment by the order of the most distinguished Lawyers and Merchants of this Town.

On the same Evening, MARIA RONDE Infant Daughter of Captain and Mrs. MAGENS.

DÉCEDE:
Le 19 du courant, Mr JOSEPH PÉRE, né à Bordeaux en France, âgé de 66 ans. Ses obsèques ont été célébrées par un concours des personnes distinguées et des principaux habitants.

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENT that I, Jared Shattuck of the aforesaid island, have sold, bargained for and delivered unto the Rulers and Wardens of the Jewish Synagogue situated in this island, the lot no. 16A and 16 D a measure brief herewith and the buildings thereon, situated in Skidengade and in consideration of the sum of One Thousand Three hundred and Twenty five pieces of eight, this island currency, to me in hand paid, the receipt whereof I hereby acknowledge, warranting and defending unto the said Rulers and Wardens of the Jewish Synagogue of this island, the beforementioned lots or to the heirs and decendants against any claim or claims whatsoever.
Witness my hand and seal at St. Thomas this 14th of October 1813.
witnesses:
J.M. Souffront.
D. Labadie.
Jared Shattuck

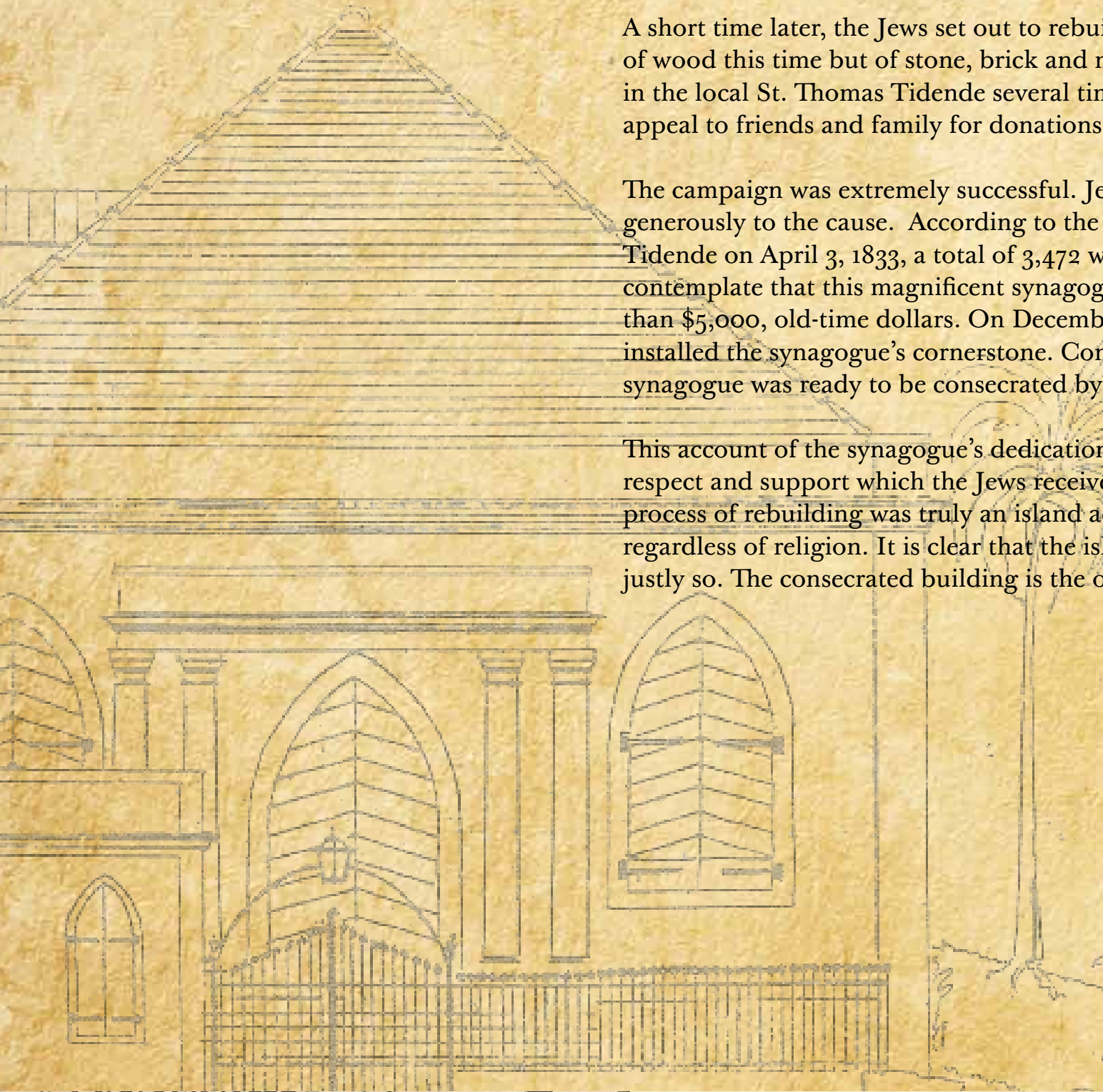
just below Mr. Gibson's. —No. 1 Engine hauled out to the Windward coast of the Island.
was no way of bringing up any other material to fence the House being far from the Street and access to it was by a long flight of Steps. D'Azavedo's House having caught, great damage was made to says the Synagogue by the fire. Schpn. and some other Gentlemen. —but your efforts proved ineffectual, —the Engine No. 1 carried in front of Captain Todd's house

Construction of the Present Synagogue 1832-1833

A short time later, the Jews set out to rebuild their house of worship, not of wood this time but of stone, brick and mortar. This ad, which appeared in the local St. Thomas Tidende several times, was part of an international appeal to friends and family for donations of money, materials, and labor.

The campaign was extremely successful. Jew and non-Jew alike contributed generously to the cause. According to the list published in the St. Thomas Tidende on April 3, 1833, a total of 3,472 was raised. It is something to contemplate that this magnificent synagogue was built for a little more than \$5,000, old-time dollars. On December 18, 1832, the congregation installed the synagogue's cornerstone. Construction was quick, and the synagogue was ready to be consecrated by September, 1833.

This account of the synagogue's dedication ceremony exemplifies the respect and support which the Jews received on St. Thomas. The entire process of rebuilding was truly an island activity, involving everybody regardless of religion. It is clear that the island shared in the Jews' joy—and justly so. The consecrated building is the one you are admiring right now.



SYNAGOGUE.

We are happy in having it in to congratulate our friends of religion on the early completion of Synagogue. About six o'clock day evening, the Congregation in their temporary place of worship shortly after they proceeded Synagogue in the usual ceremony.

THE Undersigned make known, that the Subscription List for raising a Fund for the rebuilding of the Synagogue of this Island, lies open at the first-mentioned place.



Hebrew Calendar

1833-1843 Expansion II

This period saw a further expansion of the congregation, and the continued establishment of Jews as a prominent and respected minority on St. Thomas. The Jews bought a new burial ground, established a Hebrew School, and began using the services of a bona fide minister – the Dutch Reverend Benjamin Cohen Carillon. This Jewish calendar, published on February 22, 1843, in the Tidende, is an indication of the extent to which the Jews were able to integrate in the St. Thomas community.

At a numerous meeting of the Members of the Israelite Congregation convened pursuant to requisition on Sunday Evening, the 21st June 1840,

A: WOLFF, Esq: in the Chair,

The following Resolutions were unanimously passed —

That this meeting views with feelings of disgust and abhorrence the dreadful obloquy attempted to be cast upon the whole body of Israelites, in consequence of the late murders which have been committed in Damascus, by imputing to them the atrocious crime of immolating human victims for the purpose of using their blood in their religious rites, an imputation, as revolting to human nature, even in a state of barbarism, as it is devoid of truth; and which it is therefore the duty of all Israelites not only to disavow but to deprecate in the strongest terms.

That the manly and patriotic address made by Monsieur CREMPEUX, Vice President du consistoire Central des Israelites francais in favor and defence of our Brethren at Damascus, and in vindication of our holy religion against the vile and unfounded aspersions which it has been assailed, is re-

~~The~~ Subscriber (by permission) has opened an

~~EVENING SCHOOL~~

~~at his residence in the Garden, and is ready to receive an extra class in the English language. He purposes also to devote a portion of his time, in the~~

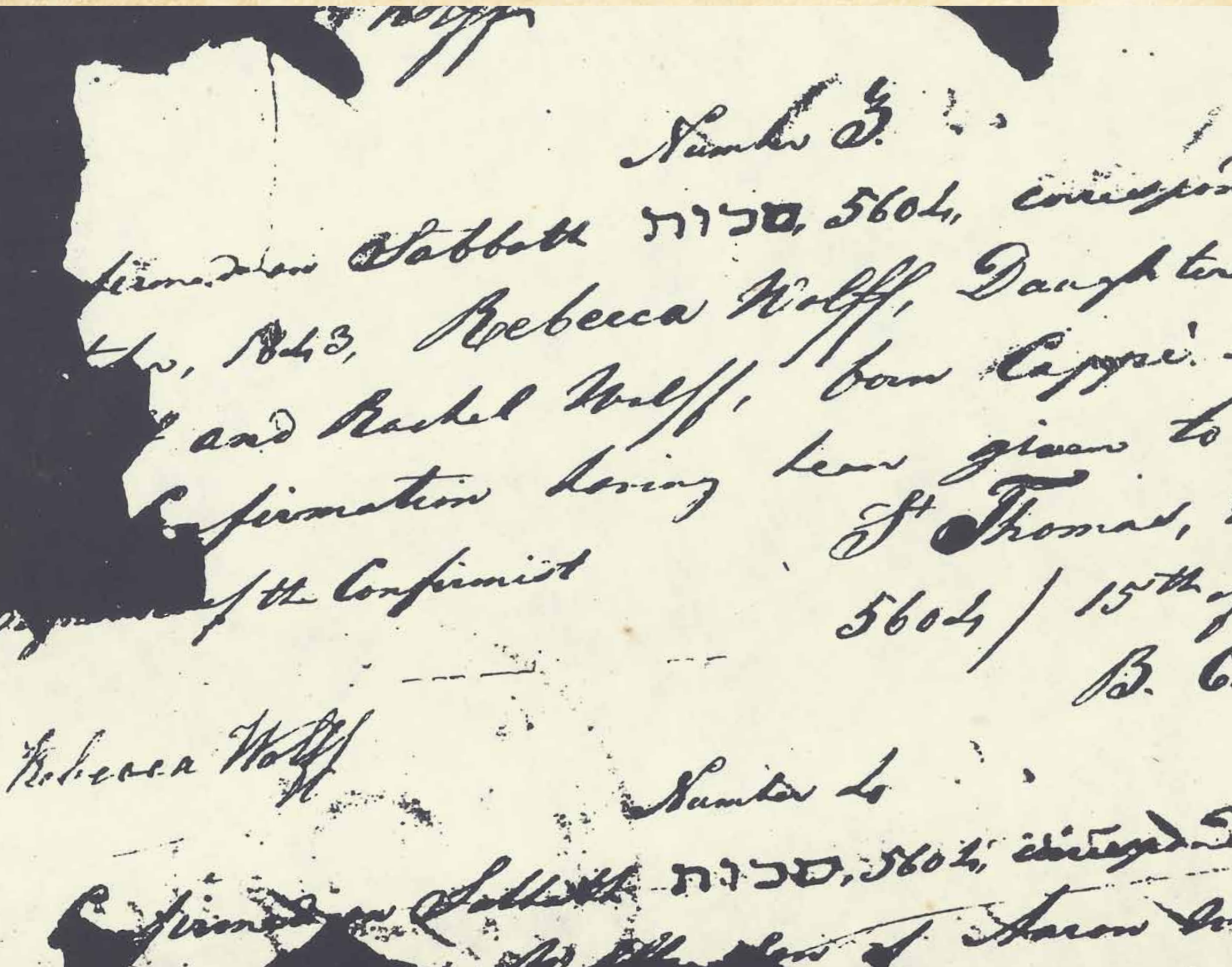
PERSONS desirous of undertaking to enclose with a Wall clean, and erect a Building on the Burial Ground of the Hebrew Congregation at the West End of the

Reform Hits St. Thomas I

In the world at large, this time period saw a proliferation of new Jewish publications and the constitution of new Jewish rituals and ideas. Attempting to link the Jewish world with the outside community, the Reform movement developed organized congregations in a number of European countries. Following the trend in St. Thomas, a grass roots movement made attempts to incorporate the liturgy of the London Reformers as early as 1842. In 1843, the St. Thomas synagogue had the distinction of performing the first Jewish Confirmation recorded in this hemisphere.

Reverend Carillon also had his mind on reforms, albeit in a very different fashion. He turned down the ideas of British reform in favor of his own style. This included the omission of large portions of the service, and the addition of prayers of his own composition. This caused a great strife within the synagogue, resounding as far as London, England.

The controversy became so heated among the Jewish community that it finally split over the issue, with some in the Carillon camp, and others espousing a more "orthodox" doctrine. For a short time, there were two places of Jewish worship on the island. After some consternation, the community finally resolved the issue by firing Reverend Carillon and hiring Reverend Moses Nathan, a conservative leader who held a much more antagonistic view toward Reform. Slowly, the two congregations learned to trust Reverend Nathan, and they rejoined under a traditional Spanish-Portuguese minhag (service liturgy).



CODE OF LA W

FOR THE

GOVERNMENT

OF

THE ISRAELITE CONGREGATION

IN THE

ISLAND OF ST. THOMAS.

SET UP BY A COMMISSION APPOINTED BY ROYAL ORDER
COMPOSED OF THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS:

ROYAL ADVOCATE BIRCH.

M. N. NATHAN, MINISTER OF CONGREGATION.

ERON WOLF, Esq.,

E. C. M. DA COSTA

ROTHSCHILD, Esq.,

L. H. OSORIO, Esq.

APPROVED AND SANCTIONED BY HIS GRACIOUS MAJESTY FREDERIC

FEBRUARY 17, 1848.

PHILADELPHIA

C. SHERMAN, PRINTER.

10 ST. JAMES STREET.

1845-1865 Expansion III

One of the first results of reconciliation was a new set of by-laws. Put together under the supervision of Reverend Nathan as well as Danish governmental officials, the new laws were approved by the congregation, by the Danish colonial government, and by the Danish national government. This allowed for further growth in the congregation.

This time period was one of great prosperity for St. Thomas as well as for the Jewish community. St. Thomas became known as one of the best ports in the Caribbean, and people of all backgrounds flocked to the area. Within years, the Jewish community had reached over 600 on the island, with greater than 100 souls attending services each Sabbath. At such rate, it was assumed, the size of the synagogue would soon prove inadequate for its constituents.

During this time, the island established new institutions, including a savings bank and a gas light company, and it was never uncommon to see Jewish names filling roles of great responsibility.

As the population of the islands grew, and the types of jobs in societal roles diversified, the Danish government issued a new set of Colonial Laws. Section 71 of these laws allowed a provision for religion that seemed to ensure the island's harmony. It actually opened the door for a small group of Jews who still held on to their desire for reform.

OF THE JEWISH SYNAGOGUE
OF AN ARCHITECT.

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FORM OF SPECIAL SERVICE

HELD IN THE

SYNAGOGUE,

ST. THOMAS, W. I.,

ON THE 7th DECEMBER, 1863,

NINE A SERMON

SCHISM!

Reform Hits St. Thomas II

After exchanging several angry letters with an increasingly resistant Reverend Moses Nathan, 14 members of the congregation broke off on March 14, 1867, to form their own synagogue, called "Beth Elohim." Using the liturgy of the British reformers, they rented the second floor of a house three blocks away (at 19 & 20 Commandant Gade) and began holding services there regularly. The group justified their existence to the government by stating that the Reform practices were different enough from the Spanish-Portuguese ritual to warrant a new congregation. To the great chagrin of the first synagogue, the government eventually accepted this argument.

Word of the new synagogue spread quickly. In America, Isaac Mayer Wise, one of the fathers of the American Reform Movement, responded enthusiastically in his publication, the *Israelite*. David Woolf Marks, author of the British reform prayer book, also sent them a note of encouragement. On the island, though, the new synagogue still met a great deal of animosity from its established counterpart. Accusations flew constantly from one side to the other.

The Hebrew Reformed Congregation's services included many divergences from the Spanish-Portuguese service. As evidenced in this account of a Rosh Hashanah service in 1869, the congregation even used an organ and choir in its worship.

By this time, the original congregation had swelled to 72 members. It purchased its own burial ground, and drafted its own set of by-laws. Frustrated, Reverend Nathan left his post. His successor, E.N. Martinez, followed suit soon after, leaving the position to lay leader David Cardoze, Jr. Constantly battling, the two congregations had very little else to do with each other.

However, this separation was not to last too long. By this time, more efficient steamships and the birth of the telegraphic era began to diminish St. Thomas's importance in the international trade. Recent storms and plagues spearheaded an economic decline, and an aborted attempt by the United States to purchase the islands left the area demoralized. The heyday of St. Thomas was over, and the population, in response, was moving elsewhere.

St. THOMAS.—The spirit of progress, we are happy to learn of a welcome correspondent, has also reached our brethren of St. Thomas. A new Portuguese congregation, on the pattern of the London reform congregation, has been established. This new organization has to contend with many difficulties in the midst of this orthodox community; still, with the help of God, it will succeed. No reform congregation is given up for want of support. If they in St. Thomas succeed as fast as we do here, they will soon be a blessing to the cause of Israel on that happy island.



Resolution and Consolidation

Many Jews contributed to the emigration out of St. Thomas. A large number travelled to Colon, Panama (the future site of the Panama Canal), where they established congregation Kol Shearith Yisrael in 1876. Others moved to the United States or to other islands where business was better.

Those who stayed on St. Thomas realized that the population could no longer support two synagogues, and so the two groups set their differences aside and once again reunited. This reconciliation produced a new set of by-laws, which satisfactorily addressed the needs of both the reformers and the traditionalists.

It is also possible that the transition from two synagogues back into one was significantly easier because of the presiding minister. David Cardoze, Jr. differed from his predecessors in that he was a long-term resident of the islands, running a dry-goods store for many years, serving as a teller in the savings bank, and taking on nearly every lay-leadership position in the synagogue before becoming reader of the congregation. With a strong familiarity in St. Thomas Jewish folk customs, it was likely easier for him to walk the line between the two sides, resolve existing conflicts, and bring the synagogue into its next state of existence.



Logot. i. Hoalving
1:20



Isaac and Rebecca Paiewonsky, c. 1904



Ralph, Benjamin and Isidor Paiewonsky, c. 1913



St. Thomas Colonial Bank check to "Your good selves" signed by Isaac Levin and Max E. Trepuk, 28 June 1898.

A Shrinking Population

David Cardoze officiated over the congregation until the age of 90. According to one report, his mind and eyes remained sharp until the end of his life, and he performed the service every week with intelligence and passion. The Jewish community, however, continued to shrink, and families continued to move off the island.

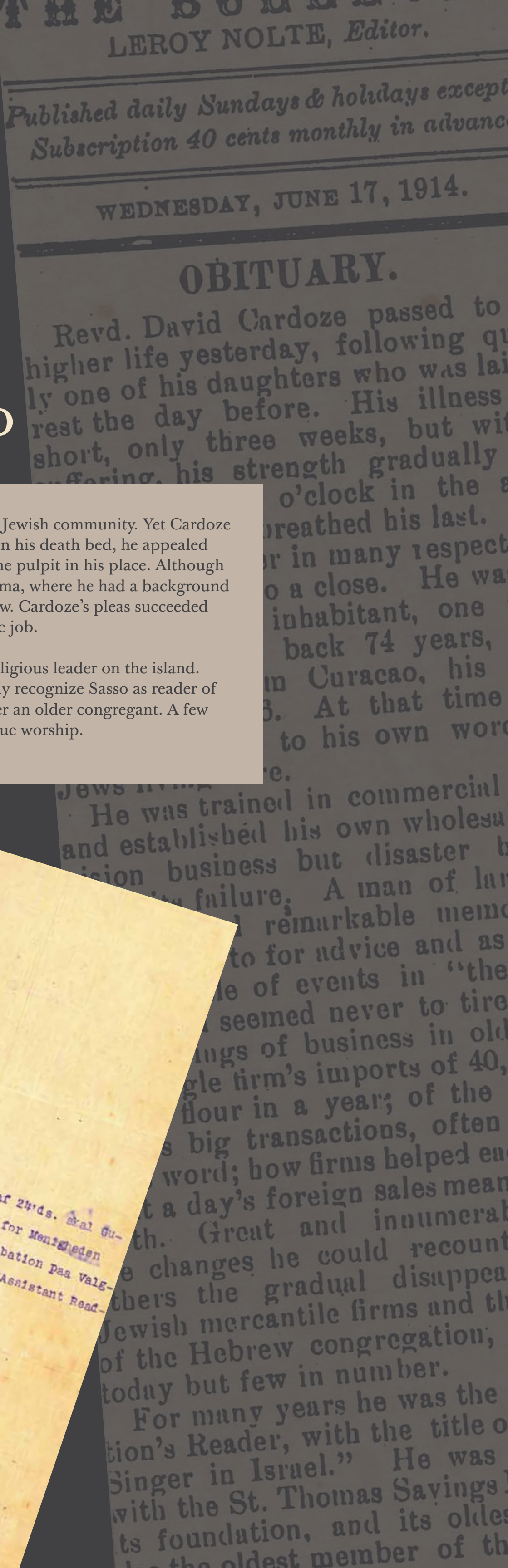
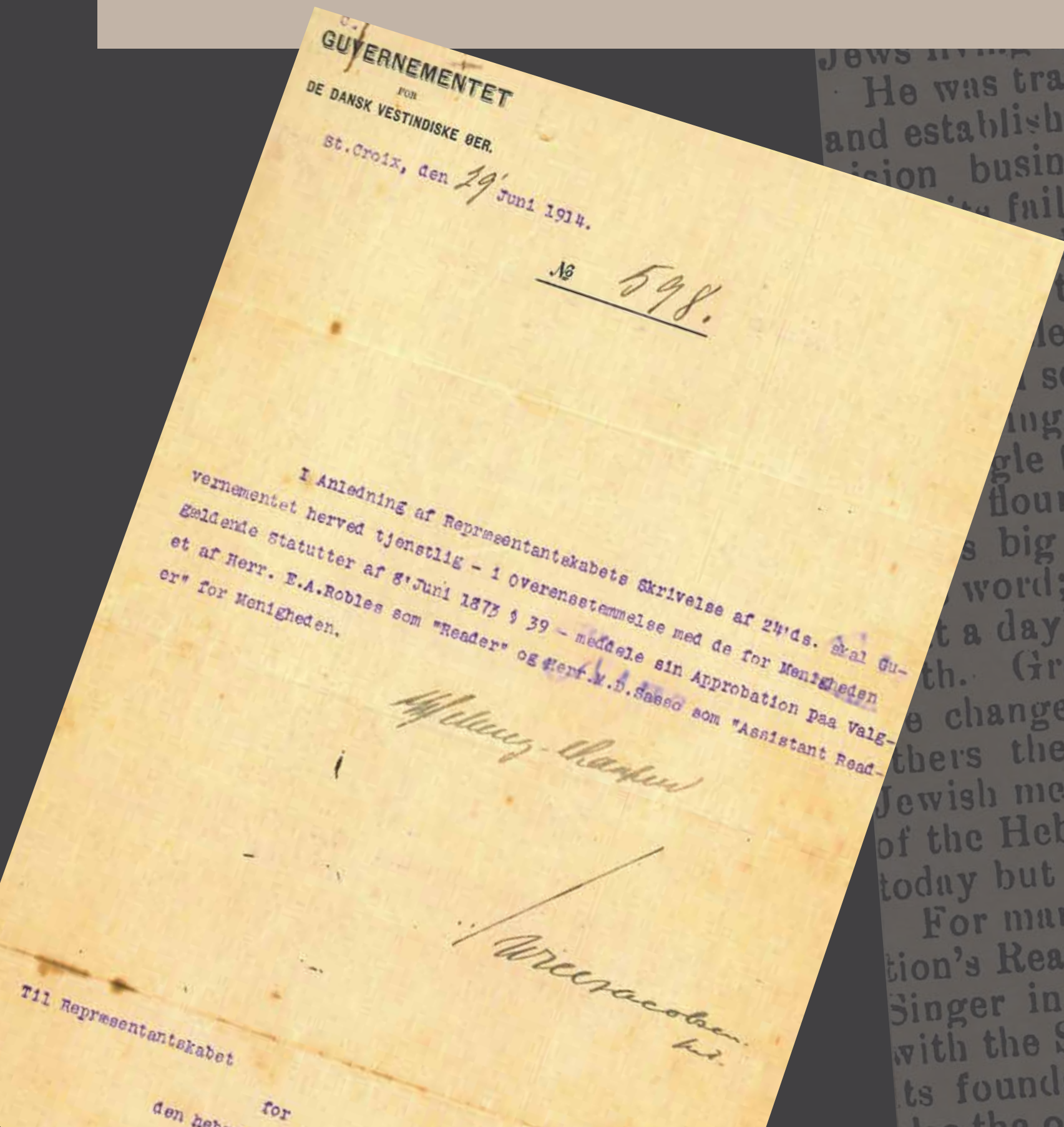
But during the late 19th century St. Thomas saw a small influx of Jews from Eastern Europe. Coming over in search of better opportunities, they established themselves as merchants on St. Thomas. Hard-working and innovative, they quickly rose to join the ranks of the island's most prosperous. Within the Hebrew Congregation, they helped to bolster the shrinking numbers, and became financial pillars of the synagogue during its most difficult years.

These families still hold prominent roles in the St. Thomas community. The Levin (pronounced "Leveen") and Trepuk families ran large dry-goods shops on Main Street. The Paiewonsky family developed one of the largest business enterprises in the Virgin Islands. Members of the family include former Governor Ralph Paiewonsky and island author and historian Isidor Paiewonsky.

Transition From the Venerable David Cardoze to the Young Moses Sasso

Reverend Cardoze's death in 1914 dealt a terrible blow to the Jewish community. Yet Cardoze made sure that he did not leave his congregants leaderless. On his death bed, he appealed to a young man named Moses DeCastro Sasso to ascend to the pulpit in his place. Although born on St. Thomas, Sasso had lived much of his life in Panama, where he had a background in religious observance as well as a little knowledge of Hebrew. Cardoze's pleas succeeded and Sasso agreed to move back to the island and continue the job.

And so at the age of 20, Moses Sasso became the youngest religious leader on the island. Because of his age, the Danish government could not officially recognize Sasso as reader of the congregation. Instead it named him assistant reader under an older congregant. A few years later, he assumed full official responsibility for synagogue worship.



ON THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ST. THOMAS,
U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS*

By ALBERT A. CAMPBELL

The island of St. Thomas has been an American possession since 1917 when it was purchased from Denmark with two other West Indian islands. The white inhabitants, numbering 1,293 at that time (13 per cent of the total population) and perhaps 1,500 at present, include about 50 Jews, the remnants of a once prosperous and considerable community. The earliest Jewish settlers apparently arrived during the latter half of the eighteenth century, almost a hundred years after the island had been seized by Denmark and turned over to the Danish West India and Guinea Company for exploitation as a sugar producing colony.¹ An early traveler,² writing in 1777, noted "the large number of Jews in the (Danish) islands, especially in St. Croix." However, only a few of these lived in St. Thomas, which according to the census of 1789 contained only nine Jewish families.³ Leah Izidro was born in 1786, the first Jewish child born in this small community. The next recorded census, in 1837, counted some 400 Jews, or about 60 families.⁴ It is significant that this period of rapid growth paralleled the island's change from a plantation economy to an urban culture centering around the harbor. Whereas in 1789 over three-fifths of the population (5,266) lived in the country,

* Despite the limited importance of this community its history is interesting as typifying

Despite the limited importance of this community its history is interesting as typifying experiences of the several Jewish groups which migrated to the West Indies

¹Berger, Rolf, *Die Inseln St. Thomas und St. Croix* (Hamburg 1934) p. 115.
²Nissen, J. P., *Reminiscences of a 46 Years' Residence in the Island of St. Thomas in the West Indies* (Nazareth, Pa. 1838) p. 138.

The Early Sasso Years 1917-1945

Moses Sasso inherited a shrinking but dedicated congregation. Although not well versed in Hebrew and with only minimal knowledge of Jewish law, he held services every Sabbath morning and on each holiday. Children from the time remember the length of the ceremony as "Molito" chanted each prayer with great emotion.

In December, 1925, Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, rabbi emeritus of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation in New York City, visited Sasso and the Hebrew Congregation. His eight-month stay on the island proved a shot in the arm for the synagogue. On island, Mendes began to teach a confirmation class of seven younger members of the synagogue. Under his tutelage, Reader Sasso developed his skills as a preacher, speechwriter and disseminator of Judaic knowledge. Mendes also served as a fund-raiser, appealing to his own synagogue in New York and finally raising enough money for the Hebrew Congregation to replace its damaged roof. Upon his departure in July, 1926, the synagogue board awarded him the title of Rabbi Emeritus of the St. Thomas Hebrew Congregation.

By 1942, fewer than 50 Jews still lived on St. Thomas. As this contemporary article shows, scholars saw the age-old community as warranting little more than a footnote in history.



The American Influx 1945-1966

After World War II, St. Thomas once again began to show signs of life. Americans, replete with their new-found prosperity, came down as tourists and fell in love with the island. Many decided to move here, bringing with them their own brand of American Reform Judaism. Over the course of the next several years, this stateside population grew and far outnumbered the dwindling Sephardic population.

These Americans pushed to introduce some of their own traditions into the synagogue service, including incorporation of the Reform Union Prayer Book. Sometimes they met with opposition from Reader Sasso who wished to remain true to his *minhag* and traditions. But more often than not, Sasso eventually accepted the modifications as necessary to the well-being of the new population.

One of the most significant developments during this time was the formation of a Sisterhood at the synagogue. Pictured here at their first seder, the Sisterhood quickly became one of the most powerful and prominent groups within the congregation, leading numerous synagogue events and fund-raisers.

By the end of Sasso's career, the synagogue was on an upswing, poised for a significant transformation. With different needs and demands, the new post-war Americans began to rejuvenate the Jewish community, taking it in new and different directions. For 50 years, Sasso struggled to keep his congregation alive. He finally achieved success when he was able to step down from a congregation that could once again perpetuate itself.

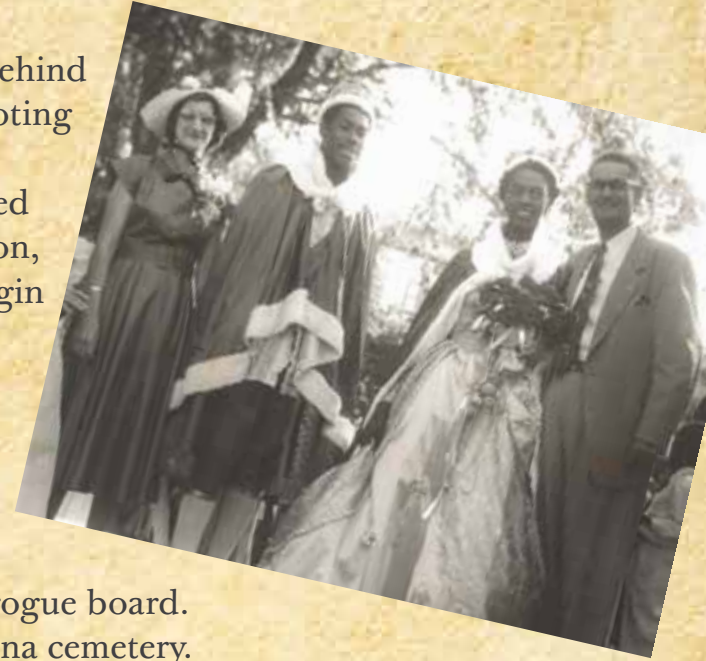
Morris Fidanque De Castro, Virgin Islands, Governor 1950-1954

Morris De Castro was the first native Virgin Islander appointed to the Governor's post. Born to an old and respected Caribbean Sephardic family, De Castro began his political career at age 16 as a clerk in the V.I. Sanitation Department. Over the following years, he progressed steadily from one post to the next, learning about his government intimately before eventually presiding over it. During his time in office, De Castro helped to bring the islands closer to popular self-rule by bringing the issues of the government directly to the people. His weekly radio announcements and frequent public appearances brought De Castro great respect and popularity.



Morris De Castro was one of the primary architects behind the Revised Organic Act of 1954. The act extended voting privileges to non-English speakers, brought income tax revenues directly to the V.I. government, nullified Congress's veto power over Virgin Islands legislation, and consolidated the governments of the three Virgin Islands into a common system. This paved the way for the establishment of a more independent Virgin Islands government.

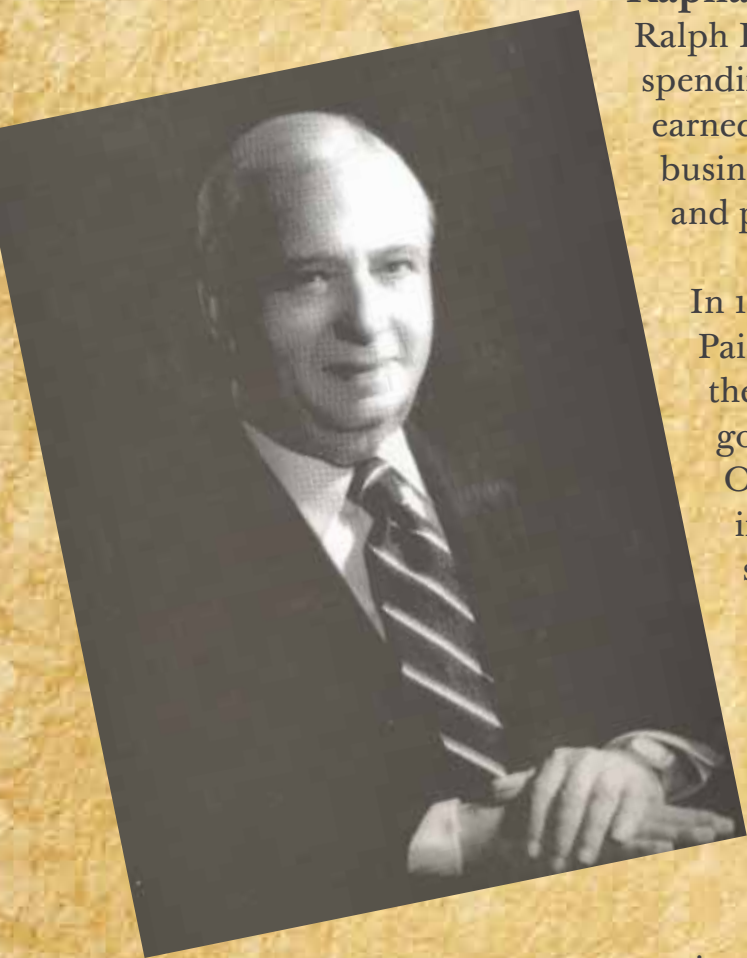
Before and after his term, De Castro served actively in the Hebrew Congregation, frequently filling leadership roles on the synagogue board. He now rests along with his family in the Altona cemetery.



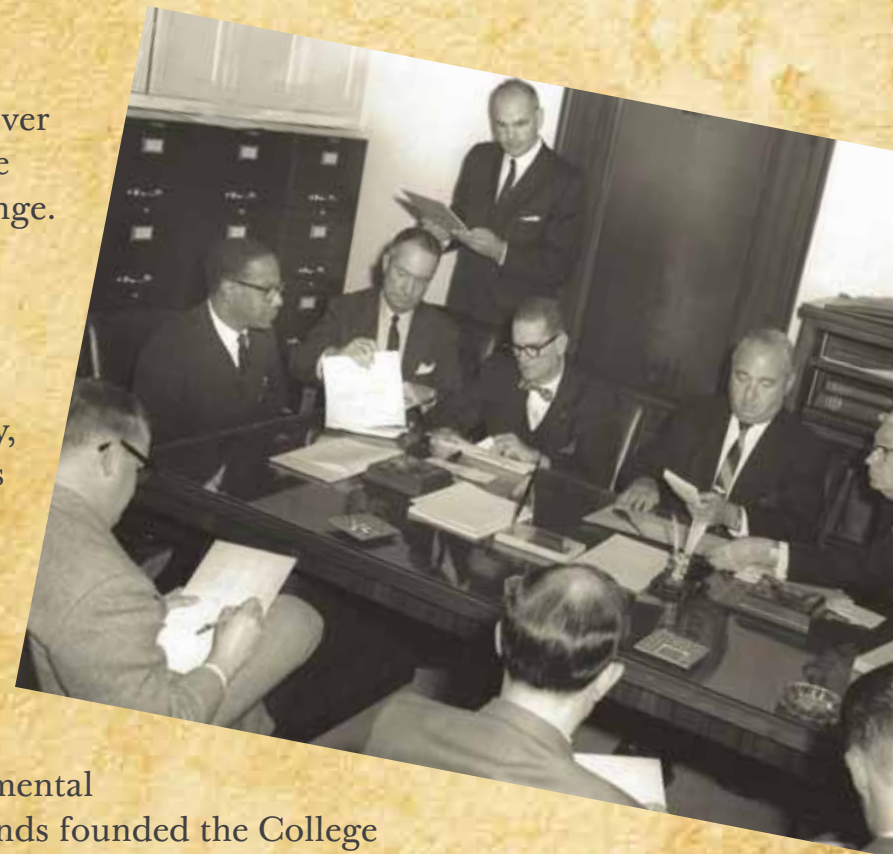
Jewish Governors of the Virgin Islands

Raphael Moses (Ralph) Paiewonsky, Virgin Islands, Governor 1961-1969

Ralph Paiewonsky (1907-1991) came from an affluent St. Thomas merchant family. After spending his school years in St. Thomas, Paiewonsky attended New York University where he earned his degree in chemistry. Returning to the island, he expanded the family's Bay Rum business into a financial empire and became intensely involved in island finances and politics.



In 1961, President John Kennedy appointed Paiewonsky Governor of the Virgin Islands. Ever the entrepreneur, Paiewonsky approached the governorship as a financial and social challenge. Over the course of his eight-year term, he introduced a number of reforms that jump-started the territory's sluggish economy and brought the Virgin Islands into great prosperity. Expanding the tourist industry, Paiewonsky widely publicized the islands as an attractive vacation paradise. He also opened the door for outside businesses to establish themselves on the islands, and succeeded in luring the Hess and Harvey Alumina



companies to build plants on St. Croix. In an effort

to improve education on the islands, Paiewonsky promised governmental jobs to all high school graduates; also under his administration, the islands founded the College of the Virgin Islands, today the University of the Virgin Islands.

A devoted member of the Hebrew Congregation, Ralph Paiewonsky spent many years on the synagogue board. He is buried in the Altona Jewish cemetery on St. Thomas.

Second-in-Command: Aron Wolff

During the mid-19th century, Aron Wolff held the position of second-in-command to the governor. An esteemed Jewish statesman from St. Thomas, Wolff participated actively in synagogue politics, starting a school on the island, coordinating Jewish magazine subscriptions from England, and serving more than once as president of the congregation. He also helped to start the island's first savings bank and insurance company, and attained the rank of major in the local militia. Some sources state that Wolff served for a short time as governor, probably while the presiding governor was away. As such, he deserves mention here.



The Jewish Population 1966-1974

Soon after Sasso retired in 1966, the Hebrew Congregation changed dramatically. First, the synagogue incorporated as a non-profit organization, changing its official name to "The Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, Inc." Applying for and receiving membership in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the congregation hired a Reform rabbi, Samuel Markowitz, to lead it into the new age. Completely restructured, the Hebrew Congregation completed the switch from its traditional Sephardic roots to a model of the American Reform synagogue.

Over the next years, the congregation adjusted to its new identity. Rabbi Markowitz gave way to Rabbi Murray Blackman, who in turn gave way to Rabbi Joseph Karasick. In 1971, Karasick stepped down and laypeople took over the ministerial duties. The synagogue board initiated numerous projects and events, and congregants began to play a larger role in their congregation. Energy and drive sometimes resulted in terrible quarrels, but also pushed the synagogue to new heights of participation and involvement.

One of the Hebrew Congregation's most important actions during these years was its renovation of the synagogue building. Badly in need of repair after several years of low maintenance, the building underwent a facelift. Workers removed the plaster from the interior walls, converted the Sukkah area (where you stand right now) to a closed vestry, and performed crucial ceiling and structural repairs. As the renovations finished, the Hebrew Congregation redirected the building in grand fashion with a three-day celebration of its past, present and future.



Once Again, Expansion 1974-1983

Without a rabbi, the congregation learned to support itself spiritually. In 1975, an empowered congregation hired Rabbi Stanley Relkin to serve as spiritual leader. Over the following decades, the synagogue and its members moved into a period of great prosperity.

As the St. Thomas economy improved, more American Jews moved onto the island and joined the synagogue. This enlarged membership gave the congregation financial stability. Seeing a need for more space, the synagogue added a second story to its back room. At the same time, the congregation's Hebrew School took strong root, educating over a dozen children every week.



In 1983, the congregation celebrated its sanctuary's 150th anniversary. The whole island looked on in admiration as its Jewish residents rejoiced in their heritage during a gala event-filled weekend.

In 1986, the Synagogue expanded further. It purchased the house at #9 Crystal Gade for use as a social hall. Named after Bea Lilienfeld, an illustrious and involved member of the congregation, the house underwent refurbishment. In 1991, a new rabbi, Bradd Boxman, led the congregation in its dedication.

Between 1991 and 1995, further expansion enhanced the synagogue's population. The contributions of many brought the Hebrew Congregation to new levels of activity and enthusiasm. Between the youth group, adult school classes, volunteer choir, board and committee meetings, and special programs, nearly all of the 120 member families dedicated themselves to the synagogue's welfare. In a new effort to enhance tourism, the synagogue installed a gift shop and expanded its offices into the second story.



Bringing us into the Present



This time period also saw huge preparations for a bicentennial celebration between September 1995 and June 1996. Major island corporations contributed to the effort, helping to bring in illustrious guests such as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, poet Maya Angelou and violinist Itzhak Perlman, and to fund an art exhibition of early Camille Pissarro works. However, on the eve of the celebration, disaster struck. Between September 15 and 16, 1995, Hurricane Marilyn wreaked havoc, crippling the island for months. Miraculously the synagogue suffered little damage, but many island houses and facilities were destroyed. Nevertheless, the congregation determined to continue its plans. With the opening of this museum on November 17, 1995, the celebration commenced with hope and enthusiasm.



On September 25, 1997, the U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service, designated the St. Thomas Synagogue as a National Historic Landmark. The St. Thomas Synagogue is surpassed in age among U.S. synagogues only by Touro Synagogue (1763), in Newport, Rhode Island, which was designated a National Historic Site on March 4, 1946. Touro Synagogue, however, was only occasionally used for worship between the 1820s and 1880s, making the St. Thomas Synagogue the oldest synagogue building in continuous use in the United States. The congregation of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, was established in 1749 and erected its current house of worship in 1840. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1980 in part in belief that it was the second oldest extant in the country and the oldest in continual use. The St. Thomas Synagogue predates Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim Synagogue by seven years.



In 2000 a major restoration of the temple was completed, led by restoration architect William Taylor and committee chair Charles Ellick. The restoration was necessary to counteract the negative effects of time, climate, and previous renovations that allowed moisture to attack the walls. The interior walls were once again covered in white plaster and the French brass chandeliers, which have Baccarat crystal chimneys, were restored. The restoration cost approximately \$375,000.





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Two Hundred Years and Counting...

Today, after more than 200 years of struggle and prosperity, sorrow and joy, destruction and rebuilding, we take a moment to reflect on where we, as a community, are going. Once, we were traders and merchants. Now, we take on all kinds of occupations. Once, we all huddled within two blocks of the synagogue. Now, we live all over the island. Once, we came from Spain and Portugal, escaping oppression and searching for freedom. Now, we come from all over the world, searching for new opportunities. St. Thomas, once a colonial port of trade for Denmark, is now a tropical port of call. Throughout the generations our synagogue has remained a house of comfort, refuge, and reflection. This is our reminder that while our congregation may change with the times, the soul of the synagogue stays constant.

What lies ahead? After this generation's services and celebrations, projects and exhibits, what will we have built for those to come after us? Just as our congregation changed over the years, it will change again. We will have a different role in society. We may, indeed, have a different synagogue. We will serve the needs of the time to survive, as all Jews have done for so long. Yet, we will also follow in the footsteps of our ancestors, preserving our heritage and honoring our traditions. The sands of time may pass over our shores again and again, changing our landscape, but the soul of our synagogue and its people remains eternal.

Our history does not end. Rather, with each generation,
it begins anew.

This museum narrative is a collection of historical data from a variety of sources, primary and secondary. Segments of this narrative were taken from "A Short History of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas," edited by Rabbi Stanley T. Relkin and Monty R. Abrams