

NYACK'S FIRST SYNAGOGUE

Michael Nevins

On October 27, 2024 my chorus, The Main Street Singers, sang at a Sabbath service for the Berea Seventh-day Adventist Church, located at 67 South Broadway and Hudson Avenue in Nyack. Upon arrival I noted that the small stone building appeared quite old and the congregants all were African Americans. While examining the interior, I was surprised that the stained glass windows had Biblical motifs typical of what one would expect to see in a traditional synagogue — so I decided to investigate.

I learned that Nyack's Berea church was begun during the late 1920s by Sister Emma Elizabeth Faulden in her living room. In 1935 she took her savings from washing and ironing to buy hymn books and chairs and a hall was rented on Depew Avenue, but as the membership grew, leaders realized the need for a real church building. A temporary quarters was dedicated in 1944 and sufficed until in February 1966 the present building was purchased from Congregation Sons of Israel. Now I wanted much more detail.

When Abraham Brown bought a farm in Orangeburg in 1848 he became the first Jewish landowner in that part of Rockland County. He opened a tailor and clothing shop in Piermont, but when half that village burned down in 1861 he and his neighbor Moses Oppenheimer removed their businesses to nearby Nyack. In March 1870, twenty Jewish families, mainly German immigrants, formed the Jewish Society of Nyack that met regularly at the back of Brown's shop on Main Street just west of Franklin. The fledgling society incorporated in 1891 as Congregation B'nai Israel; Meyer Brown was elected president and Dr. Isadore Senigallia, a former sea captain and Rockland's first Jewish physician, became vice president

In 1882 the group rented a meeting hall on Piermont Avenue but it was unheated and in winter Torah scrolls had to be carried to members' homes — and there was a fine for non-attendance.. By 1907 the congregation was meeting on the second floor of a building at the southeast corner of Main and Broadway which they leased for \$18 a year, but the the roof leaked and before long members were exploring the idea of a permanent house of worship. On March 2, 1920 for \$100 they purchased a lot on the corner of South Broadway and Hudson from wealthy landowner Tunis Depew and after four years of fundraising the cornerstone was laid in 1924 — one hundred years ago.

When construction of the yellow brick building was completed in September 1925, an elaborate dedication ceremony was held that was attended by local dignitaries and led by Dr. David De Sola Pool, then the country's leading Sephardic rabbi and spiritual leader of Congregation Shearith Israel in Manhattan. The event also marked the induction of the first full-time rabbi, Leon Lang, who in his remarks described the religious path he intended to follow:

The Temple Israel is to avoid Orthodox Judaism just as it would Reformed Judaism. Our faith is that of Traditional Judaism. The Judaism contained in the Holy Scriptures. We are to worship as did our fathers, and their fathers before them. We are to have as our two standards Traditional Judaism and Loyal Americanism.

Each family had its own place in the new sanctuary and although men and women sat together, there wasn't enough room for children who were assigned to the small balcony. On High Holy Days members came to services dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns. In 1925 the congregation voted to join the Conservative movement and in 1936 the organization's name was changed from Temple B'nai Israel to Congregation Sons of Israel (CSI).

By the early 1960s the South Broadway building had become too small and in June 1964 a deal was struck with the Berea Seventh Day Adventist Church for \$70,000. On the day before the closing (February 2, 1966) the original cornerstone was removed and when opened contained a tube with a packet of mildewed and undecipherable papers and 70 cents in coins.

All members weren't comfortable with the synagogue's religious direction and there was a bitter split between traditionalists and those who favored Reform practices which led to the creation in 1966 of Temple Beth Torah on North Highland Avenue in Upper Nyack that today calls itself The Reform Temple of Rockland County. CSI moved to a larger, modern synagogue on the former Lott estate on North Broadway that was dedicated on September 21, 1967.

Although the history of Nyack's first dedicated synagogue building was fairly conventional, the origin of the town's Jewish community was distinctly atypical and what follows next is substantially extracted from my article, "Nyack's Mystery Man: Who Was Edward D. Hesdra?" that appeared in 2021 in *South of the Mountains*, the journal of the Historical Society of Rockland County. Although mere conjecture on my part, it's conceivable that this narrative might have had an indirect impact on subsequent development of both the Jewish and Adventist congregations.

In 2015 when the Toni Morrison Society placed a commemorative bench in Nyack's Memorial Park in honor of 19th century resident Cynthia Hesdra and the adjacent street was renamed after her, a plaque placed next to the bench provided these details:

*Cynthia Hesdra, an African American woman who was enslaved early in her life and after gaining her freedom became a successful entrepreneur, land owner, and Underground Railroad Conductor. She lived in Nyack during the mid-to-late 19th century, was born in Tappan, New York, acquired her wealth through her thriving laundry trade and purchased a number of properties in both New York City and Nyack. She **and her husband Edward** opened their house to countless fugitive slaves who made their journey north along the Hudson River. This memorial honors Cynthia Hesdra's personal fortitude, entrepreneurial vision and her compassionate commitment to freedom.*

Other than this, little of substance ever was written about Cynthia's husband, but a contemporary newspaper account described Edward Hesdra as "a free Hebrew mulatto [who] identified as negro...but in religion was a Jew." Another article reported "He was a believer in the Jewish faith and *belonged* to a Jewish society in Nyack." Because this was both unexpected, and intriguing, I decided to dig further into the Hesdra family narrative.

Edward Hesdra was born in Haiti in 1811 and his ancestors probably were Sephardic Jews who were expelled from the Iberian peninsula during the Inquisition and then settled in southwestern France. His father, Leon Hesdra (1744-1829) was born in Bordeaux, may have served in Napoleon's army, and eventually migrated to Haiti where he owned a sugar plantation that was burned in the slave revolution of 1789. Leon married Fanny, a former slave, who seems to have converted to Judaism and the family moved to Virginia in 1833.



The details were well described in Lori Martin's book *The Ex-Slave's Fortune* (2008) and later in my article in *South of the Mountains* (Vol. 65, No. 2, 2021) so I'll skip far ahead until the very end of Cynthia and Edwards' lives.

Cynthia Moore Hesdra was born in 1808 in Piermont's Mine Hole district (Piermont then was known as Tappan Landing.) Although the cause of her demise in 1879 was unknown, the laundress's estimated worth then was roughly \$100,000 — more than three million dollars today! Because the Hesdras had no children and she left no will, there was a bitter dispute over her estate and when Edward died in 1884, the turmoil increased and litigation continued in courts for many years. Since Cynthia wasn't Jewish, she was buried in a small cemetery in Mahwah, but Edward was buried "with full Jewish rites" with members of his family in the Mokom Sholom cemetery in Queens, NYC.

Edward Hesdra's will probably was written in 1879, the same year as his wife's death, and although contested as fraudulent by family members, eventually was approved by the courts. His will stated that after all "lawful debts" and cemetery expenses were paid off and a substantial amount disbursed among family members, whatever remained should be donated to three Jewish organizations: \$20,000 to New York's Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue (Shearith Israel), \$5,000 to the "Jewish Hospital" in New York (established in 1852 but renamed Mount Sinai in 1866) and **\$1,000 to The First Jewish Society of Nyack** — today that would be worth roughly \$35,000!

A newspaper account (*Rockland County Journal*, May 30, 1891) noted that payment was delayed because at the time the will was written "there wasn't any incorporated Jewish society in place capable by law of holding property." However, this article corresponded to the time that Congregation B'nai Israel was organizing and was officially incorporated that very same year. Although there is no evidence that Edward actually was a member of Nyack's nascent Jewish community, such a huge donation, if delivered, would have assured a solid fiscal base for that impoverished group. Whatever the degree of Edward's personal religious observance, he adhered to the moral obligation of charitable giving called *tzedakah* and my research documented that both Shearith Israel and Mount Sinai Hospital in NYC received their bequests, so it appears plausible that Nyack's Jewish Society also was a recipient of Edward Hesdra's largesse, albeit probably less than the amount originally pledged.

Imagine if today someone donated the equivalent of \$35,000 to any organization —wouldn't there be some public acknowledgement? Testimonials, photos, plaques? None of those happened. Not even a park bench!

In 1991 when Congregation Sons of Israel published a history book *From Generation to Generation. One Hundred Years of Jewish Life in Nyack*, no mention was made of Edward Hesdra. Presumably no one knew about this generous Jew who'd once lived in their midst and *perhaps* made a sizable donation. It seems ironic that such an enormous bequest from this obscure mixed-race 19th century Jew might have provided seed money for what many decades later became the physical home of a vibrant congregation of black Seventh-Day Adventists. Lacking proof of receipt of Edward's donation, it's all speculation on my part, but interesting isn't it?

Michael Nevins
November, 2024



My thanks to Joseph Barbieri of the New City Library for his assistance in reviewing digitized 19th century local newspapers.