

The history and architecture of Staunton's Temple House of Israel

By Dr. Ruth E. Chodrow, V.M.D.

Editor's Note: Dr. Ruth Chodrow, congregational member and past president of the Staunton synagogue, presented the program from which this article is derived at the fall meeting of the Augusta County Historical Society on Sunday, November 11, 2012, at the temple on North Market Street. Dr. Chodrow has been researching the history of the congregation for several years. A reception followed the program in the social hall of the synagogue.

Early History of the Congregation:

There is no record of when the first Jews came to Staunton, but by the late nineteenth century there was a thriving community. In 1876, Major Alexander Hart founded the congregation known as the Temple House of Israel. At first, the congregation worshipped informally in homes. In 1885, trustees of the congregation purchased the former Hoover School on Kalorama Street in Staunton from Francis.T. Stribling for \$600.¹ The congregation first met in this building in February 1885. The building, which dates back to 1837, had been a military school and, during the Civil War, a meeting-place for Confederate officers. Its last use in the twentieth century was as Welch's Upholstery.

The first official meeting of the congregation took place on February 1, 1885 in the Kalorama street building. The minutes listed twenty-four members. At that meeting, the congregation formally named Major Hart as president and elected other officers. Dues were assessed at eight dollars per family. All the temple members pledged to close their places of business by 7 p.m. on Fridays in order to attend "Divine Worship Services" at 7:30.² The minutes included an address by Major Alexander Hart, an extract of which follows.

Nine years ago the little band of Israelites here had no congregation or place of worship; the only Jewish organization was a club formed for social amusement. The members of the club, after mature delib-

Staunton Va February 1st 1885

At the first meeting of the congregation
"House of Israel", held at the new
synagogue on Kalorama Street at 10
o'clock A. M.

Alex^r Hart in the chair who called
meeting to order.

Leon Weinberg acted as secretary.

Called the following members

present, J L Barth, Louis Cohen Jr
is Cohen Sr, Isidore Cohen, Samuel Cohen,
Solomon Cohen, Alex^r Hart, G Kirsh,
G Hillb, Saul Klungenstein, A Loeb,
Loeb, M B Oberdorfer, Saul Shultz,
Sackerman, Leon Weinberg, B Weinberg,
G Strauss, Solomon Switzer, Abe
Switzer, Julius Switzer,
present Louis Eisenman, Isidore Kirsh
Moritz Witz.

All above named members signed
constitution to be active members.

Minutes from the organizational meeting of Staunton's Jewish citizens in order to form a house of worship.

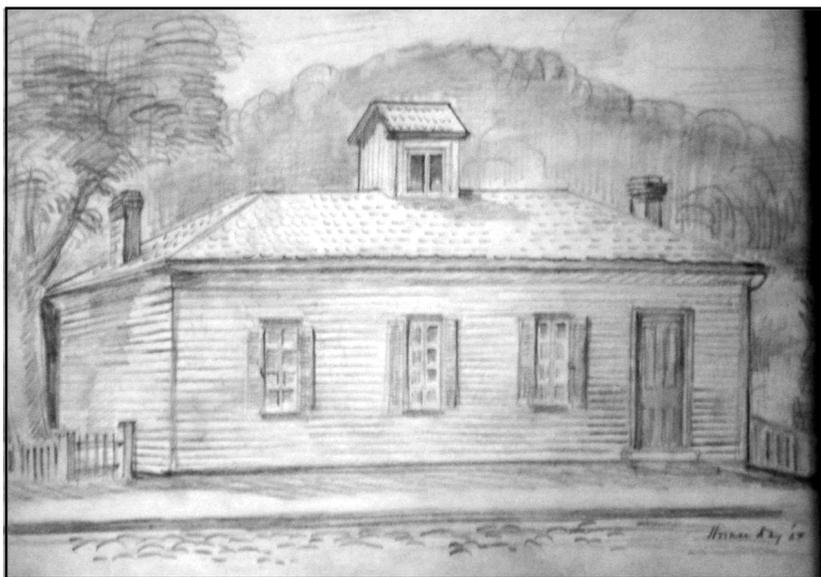
eration, concluded to organize a congregation. This congregation has moved like the ark of old, from place to place, finding itself frequently in disagreeable quarters, troubles have often assailed the congregation, and several times the disturbing elements have almost brought about complete and final ruin. Hope seemed extinguished, but the little band worked steadily with their flag of Faith and Religion flying defiantly. God's protective arm saved us from ruin.... We are assembled here this morning in this building, to be used as a synagogue, as permanent home for the congregation.³

The first mention of a religious school appears in the minutes of September 1887. The board voted to present five dollars to the "Sabbath School" for books and supplies. A mention of Sabbath School occurred again in 1895, as being run by Miss Switzer and Mrs. Josie Loeb on Saturday mornings. In 1904, the schedule changed so that the Sabbath School met on Sunday mornings.⁴

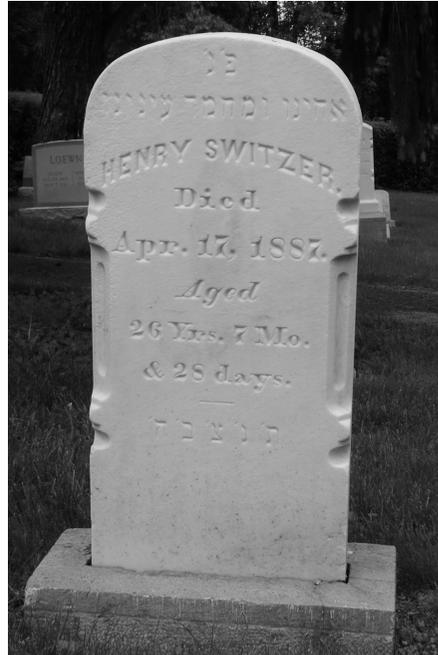
Memories of the Kalorama Street building come from a congregant, Anne Goldberg:

I remember the old building (on Kalorama Street). You came in by a door on the side, turned left, and you faced the bimah (n.b. - the dais where the ark was located). It was a very plain building. There were wooden pews on either side and a central aisle. The windows were plain glass, and the ceiling was flat and low. There was a wooden lectern and a wooden ark, and wooden chairs on the side of the lectern. The building was heated by a stove during winter; it would get very hot in the summer. We would get twenty to thirty people for the high holidays. The old building was just a hall - when we moved to the new building, I was very impressed. It was so unusual with the minarets, and the interior was very comfortable. I especially liked the pews with the cushions.⁵

In 1885, the congregation appointed a committee of three to investigate a burial ground. The committee, in April 1886, found an



An artist's rendering of the first temple building in Staunton.



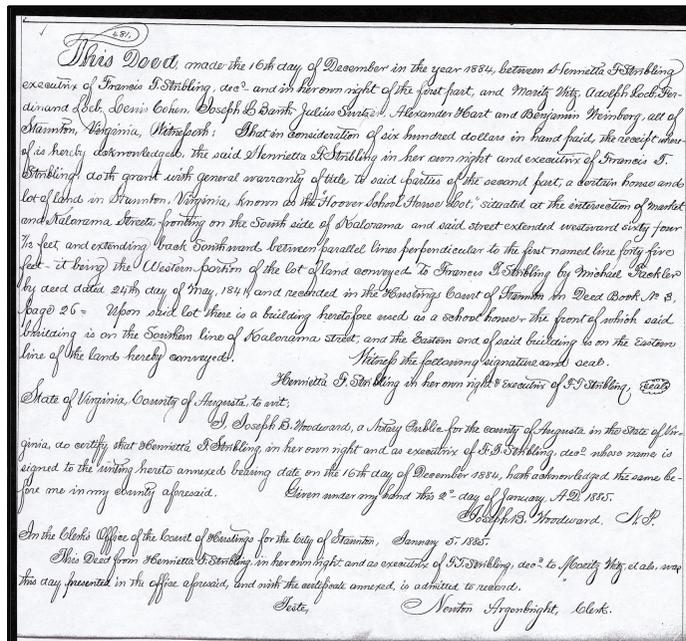
The congregation's cemetery was established in 1886 on North Augusta Street. It is still in active use today.

area of one and a half acres suitable for a cemetery on Valley Pike, now North Augusta Street. The lot, located a half-mile from the city limits, belonged to E.J. Dudley. Purchase of the ground took place in June 1886 for \$150. Dudley then donated seventy-five dollars to the congregation, making the total cost to the congregation just seventy-five dollars for the cemetery.⁶ It is still in use today. The earliest known burial, that of Henry Switzer, occurred in 1887.⁷

How the current building came to be

The story goes that sometime in 1924, Abraham Weinberg, a prominent merchant, stood up in the Kalorama Street building one day and said, "I'm tired of worshipping in something that looks like a warehouse. I'll put up half the money for a real synagogue if the congregation will put up the other half."⁸ He did and they did. A plot of land was purchased from Mary Baldwin College on North Market Street for \$7,150 on November 6, 1924.⁹ The laying of the cornerstone for the new building took place in 1925. The total cost for the synagogue building was \$17,000.

The congregation engaged the prestigious architectural firm of T.J. Collins and Son to design the new temple. The company had al-



This 1884 Staunton deed shows the purchase of the original lot for the synagogue.



The temple cornerstone was laid in 1925 as is indicated here. The Jewish calendar year is also reflected in a second stone.

ready designed a number of other Staunton landmarks such as St. Francis Catholic Church, the Augusta County Courthouse, the Valley National Bank Building, and many others. Sam Collins designed the building in the Moorish Revival style, a popular architectural fashion around the turn of the century.

The firm of Charles Connick Associates (in business from 1912 to 1986) created the stained glass windows for the synagogue. The studios, based in Boston, had some of the most celebrated stained glass artisans in the country. The company designed the great rose window in the church of St. John the Divine in New York City, as well as over 5,000 commissions for churches, libraries, and hospitals. All the glass in the temple is original Connick glass. The windows were fabricated in Boston and shipped down by train to Staunton.

Each of the six tall windows in the sanctuary has an emblem that shows a plant that grows in Israel – grapes, fig, olive, pome-

granate, etc. The glass is textured in a style reminiscent of medieval stained glass. There are also six smaller rectangular windows, two small circular windows, one large half-round, a large round memorial window, and an interior screen of clear glass. All the windows are original Connick and none have been replaced. The total cost of the Connick glass for the building was \$700 for the sixteen windows and the clear interior screen.¹⁰

Sam Collins was obviously pleased with the result of commissioned windows. In a letter dated August 28, 1925, he wrote to Charles Connick:

Dear Sir:

The glass for the Synagogue, this city, has just been placed and we wish to take occasion to say to you that it is in the exact tone and harmony with the simplicity of the building and that it satisfied us more than any stained glass work that has ever been placed in any buildings of ours.

We know, of course, that had more money been available much better glass could have been procured, but it is often the greatest test to procure fitness and tone with modest appropriations. We feel that you have accomplished this in the glass, perfectly.

Please accept our thanks and be assured of our desire to secure your services on our future work.

Yours very sincerely,

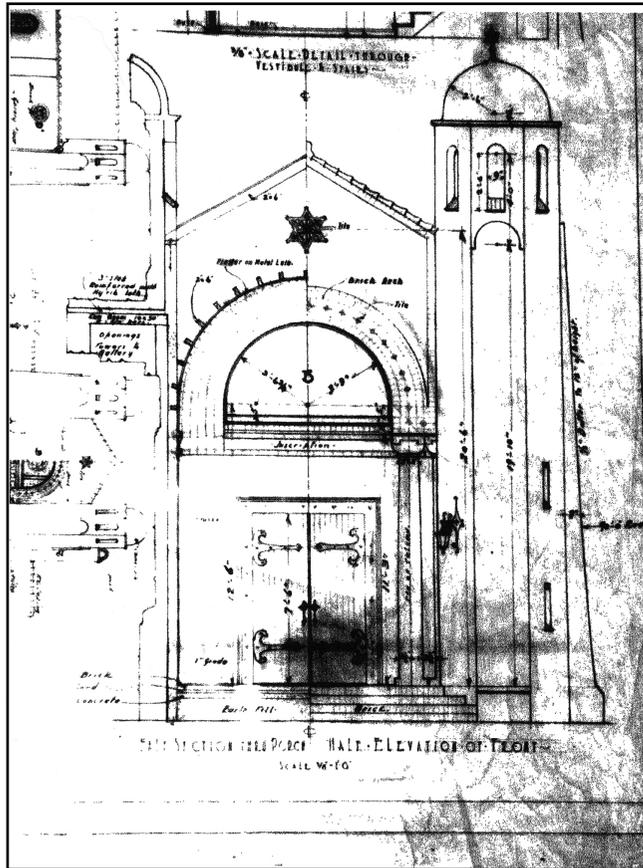
T.J. Collins and Son¹¹

W.T. Mass had made the lectern for eight dollars for use in the Kalorama Street building. The congregation still uses it today, just as Major Alexander Hart did.

The tiles in the sanctuary are a product of the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. The allowance for the tiles was seventy-five dollars.¹²

The central point of any synagogue is the ark, which holds the Torah scrolls. Our ark is cast concrete; above the scrolls is a representation of the Ten Commandments. The scrolls consist of the five books of Moses, hand-written in Hebrew on vellum. On Sabbath and some holidays, the scrolls are taken out and read. Our small temple has four scrolls, which were donated by the Walters and Goldenberg families.

A south bay on the other side of the bimah was added in 1947, and the back of temple was enlarged to make room for a kitchen and small social hall. Sam Collins, who had originally designed the temple,



Sam Collins, of the firm T.J. Collins & Son, designed the temple. Seen here is a detail from the temple blueprints as well as two stained glass windows requested by Collins.