

The Jewish Traveler: Portland

By Nahma Sandrow

No longer just a summer destination for New Englanders, this historic city nestled on Maine's Casco Bay is home to a proud and active Jewish community.



Courtesy of Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory

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Vacationers have long been traveling north for sea breezes and barbecues on the shore. But the city of Portland, Maine, offers plenty more to see and do. The state's largest city, only two hours north of Boston, Portland has commerce, industry and the arts. Yet its quiet streets and clean salt air evoke generations of Yankee seafarers in villages perched along Maine's rocky southern coast. The Jews of Portland are Yankees, too, and they likewise possess the Yankee spirit of tenacity and modesty.

History

Records from the late- 17th century mention the Moses and Abrams families in Maine as "descendants of Jews," and in the 18th century there were Jews—immigrants from Spain, Portugal and Germany—scattered inland in central and northern Maine. Among them were families named Lowe and Levi, whose descendants in the region have been traced by historian Richard Hebert. But the first documented Jew in Maine was Susman Abrams, a native of Hamburg who, after the American Revolution, opened a tannery in the town of Union, not far from Portland. Abrams married a Christian and attended church, but after he died it was said that he had managed to work secretly on Sundays while avoiding hard labor on Saturdays.

By the 1860's, when the city of Bangor to the north already had an established Jewish community, Portland, at the western end of Casco Bay, also had a small nucleus of Jewish families. In 1874, they founded a B'nai B'rith chapter, and in 1875 they dedicated a cemetery in Cape Elizabeth, a tony resort area where Jews were welcome to buy burial plots but not homes. By 1884, they had a cheder and a full-time rabbi; 20 years later, with a population of about 1,500, Portland had the biggest Jewish community in Maine.

In 1898, Samuel Rosenberg won a seat on the city's Common Council—the first Jew to hold local political office. John L. Davis, the first Portland Jew to graduate from college, became the city's first Jewish doctor and in 1908 took over the position of city physician. And in 1920, Samuel Davis, chairman of the city aldermen, substituted for the mayor who was out of town, becoming Mayor for a Day and a source of jokes for his friends ever after.

From the beginning, Portland's Jews were remarkably cohesive. Primarily Russian or Lithuanian, and mainly peddlers or small businessmen (especially junk dealers and dry goods or clothing store owners), most lived in the neighborhood of the busy harbor, close enough to shul to walk on Shabbos. Many locals married within the community, keeping families intertwined for generations.

But just as families quarrel, so too this small community suffered periodically from rifts, centered primarily on religious observance. Portland's synagogues were all Orthodox—perhaps the reason for its nickname Jerusalem of the North—but for periods each synagogue patronized its own shohet and shunned the other's. There were even stretches of time when several synagogues shared the same shohet—sometimes the same rabbi. In addition, from 1913 on, efforts to organize non-Orthodox institutions rose and fell, while ritual issues like mixed seating were hotly debated.

As the city grew, so did the Jewish population, reaching almost 3,000 by 1920. Although Portland Jewry was not particularly prosperous, it was stable enough to organize a literary club and branches of the Workmen's Circle, Y.M.H.A. and Hadassah (a small chapter still exists).

After World War II, as Portland industrialized and expanded, Jewish life expanded, too. The community numbered 838 families, with more Jewish communal activities than ever. Jews began moving outward from the old neighborhood. Simultaneously, Jewish practice evolved, making room for new synagogues of various denominations.

Community

The Jewish population of the Greater Portland area now stands at about 6,400. The Jewish Community Alliance of Southern Maine (57 Ashmont Street; 207-772-1959; www.mainejewish.org) administers a range of activities for youngsters (Early Childhood Education Preschool, a day camp on nearby Sebago Lake, a Jewish Youth Chorus and a klezmer band), adults and seniors (lectures, missions to Israel, a mahjong club).

The Levey Day School, the state's only Jewish day school, teaches 4-year-olds through 11-year-olds and is housed in Conservative Temple Beth El (400 Deering Avenue; 207-774-2649; www.templebethel-maine.org).

The fastest-growing synagogue is the Reform Congregation Bet Ha'am, in South Portland (81 Westbrook Street; 207-879-0028; www.bethaam.org), which is in the process of building a new home for worship, education, life-cycle events and functions.

The Maine Jewish Film Festival (207-831-7495; www.mjff.org) is held every March; Portland is the smallest city in the nation to offer a professional Jewish film festival.

Several nearby colleges and universities feature Jewish curricula and Hillel groups. Bates College in Lewiston offers courses in Judaic studies; the University of Southern Maine's Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine is in the process of building a Judaica collection documenting the history of Portland's Jews; and at Bowdoin College, about half an hour away in Brunswick, Rabbi Simeon Maslin offers informal Jewish summer study sessions and leads High Holiday services using a Torah scroll donated by alumni.

The nonsectarian Holocaust Human Rights Center of Maine (207-993-2620; www.hhrc.org), developed in 1985 out of a seminar at Bowdoin and guided by an interfaith board of directors, has a mission "to educate about the Holocaust, to advocate for human rights and dignity and to celebrate diversity." The center is located in the state capital, Augusta, about an hour's drive north of Portland.

Despite a high rate of intermarriage—and perhaps to some extent in response to it—the older Portland Jewish families hold on to tradition with a stubborn loyalty. One newcomer claims that "when you're introduced to a Portland Jew, he tends to tell you his parents' names and even his

grandparents'," not only his own.

Sights

Until the mid-20th century, most Jews lived and worked within half an hour of Portland's harbor, in the section now called Old Port, and strolling through the area makes a nice walking tour of the heart of the city. (It is also possible to drive along most of the route; Portland is an easy city for cars, except at the height of the summer season.)

Start near the east end of Congress Street, at the corner of India Street. At No. 267 is the Etz Chaim Synagogue (207-773-2339; www.etzchaimportland.org), a narrow red-brick building whose dark-green portico echoes the austere form of little New England churches. On a stone plaque above the entrance is engraved Maine's "tree of life," the fir tree. In 1921, when the congregation moved into this building, it was known as the "modern shul" for such innovations as sermons delivered in English, rather than Yiddish. In 1941, a house blocking the synagogue's access to Congress Street was cleared away, and the current entrance gate and modest landscaping were added out of a special bequest in the will of Mayor for a Day Samuel Davis. Now the synagogue is again being renovated, though it remains open for traditional egalitarian services, and there are plans to add a museum of local history.

Next, cross Congress Street and turn right onto Newbury Street, proceeding to No. 145-7, the former home of Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh. The brick building with large arched windows was Portland's first imposing Jewish site, built in 1904. Now the congregation has moved several miles away and the building houses unrelated offices, but the congregation's name is still engraved high above the front bays.

Returning once more to Congress Street, cross back to the Etz Chaim side and turn left to walk past some of Portland's proudest public buildings. Three blocks along, the Beaux Arts-style City Hall was designed by Carrere & Hastings, architects of buildings for the United States Senate and House of Representatives. In 1870, City Hall was the site of the nation's first women's suffrage meeting.

At 487 Congress Street stands the family home of great American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (207-774-1822; www.mainehistory.org). Guides will point out the very room where, on a dreary day, mourning the death of his young wife in 1835, he penned the line, "Into each life some rain must fall," in the poem "The Rainy Day." Across Congress Street, opposite the Wadsworth-Longfellow house, is Monument Square, where a massive bronze sculpture by Maine native Franklin Simmons commemorates the Civil War.

From the square, a mall leads down to Old Port, home to many restaurants and shops. Its quaint Victorian architecture replaced the ruins of a fire that broke out on July 4, 1866. Turn left on Fore Street for a glimpse of the Jewish past. Above a tavern at No. 338 is a black-and-gold sign reading "Zeitmans." This was Bessie and Otto Zeitman's boarding house and grocery store. Born in 1881 in Odessa, Bessie was active in Jewish philanthropy and lived to be the oldest member of the Old Port Exchange. (Find out more about Bessie in "Working Women of the Old Port," one of the Portland Women's History Trails sponsored by the Women's Studies Program at the University of Southern Maine; patfinn@usm.maine.edu.)

Nowadays, many Portland Jews live about two miles north of Old Port, near the University of Southern Maine, in the vicinity of most of the Jewish communal institutions. Here you will find the Jewish Community Alliance, the Jewish funeral home and Chabad (101 Craigie Street; 207-708-8718; www.chabadofmaine.com).

Close by is the Conservative Temple Beth El, which recently commissioned a new eternal light for its sanctuary. Handblown of vivid red glass, the light represents the Burning Bush and hangs above the Ark, whose doors are likewise decorated with a flame motif.

Shaarey Tphiloh's new location—at 76 Noyes Street (207-773-0693; shaareytphiloh@juno.com)—is a startling contrast to the old one on Newbury Street. It has the clean open lines typical of the mid-20th century, when it was built. The sanctuary ceiling, dramatically high and spacious, is vaulted and built of wood, suggesting the keel of a ship, and it harmonizes with the wooden menorah motif embedded into the Orthodox synagogue's enormous glass window.

An enjoyable way to experience this area is to walk or bike the Baxter Boulevard Trail (www.trails.org), a four-mile loop at its edge.

If you're interested in art, consider a trip to the Portland Museum of Art (www.portlandmuseumofart.org), located at 7 Congress Square. On view in its galleries of European and American art are works by Maine artists Marsden Hartley, Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth.

Side Trips

A half hour south of Portland, Old Orchard Beach is a resort town enlivened by a pier, amusement rides and beach shops. A century ago, when this was the northernmost beach on the railroad line, Joseph H. Goodkowsky opened a kosher hotel there. Soon there were three, and the scene was, as one elderly resident recalls, "matchmaker heaven."

Originally Sabbath services were held in the hotel, but when that got too crowded, Goodkowsky spearheaded the building of Beth Israel Synagogue. Today, though the town no longer has kosher eating facilities, Portland's Chabad rabbi delivers hallas every Friday, and there are hopes of opening a kosher bed and breakfast.

Orthodox Beth Israel (49 East Grand Avenue; 207-934-2973; cbisrael@lycos.com) is less than a block from the ocean. Its round stained-glass windows suggest portholes; their themes include, in addition to crown and Torah, a lighthouse in New England red and white. Inside, the wooden ceiling and carved railings evoke a ship cabin. In summer, there are services every week and sometimes even a daily minyan; the rest of the year, there are High Holiday services and an occasional bar mitzvah. Synagogue President Eber Weinstein and his four brothers all live in Old Orchard Beach year round. The synagogue is open every Shabbos—"even in a blizzard," Weinstein says.

Driving an hour north of Portland takes you to Bath, nicknamed the City of Ships because it has long been one of the nation's biggest shipbuilding centers. The nationally respected Maine Maritime Museum (www.mainemaritimemuseum.org) is located here. Within a few blocks of the sea, the graceful homes of many generations of shipbuilders and captains line Washington Street.

Also on Washington Street, at No. 862, is nondenominational Congregation Beth Israel (207-443-4606; www.bethisrael-maine.org), a white-frame structure that fits comfortably with the houses around it. Above its front door a colored window suggests the parting of the sea, with dramatic billows of mauve and yellow curving away from a central menorah; the window was donated by Caroline Gilman in memory of her young son, David Turcio. A few steps away on Washington Street is the Minnie Brown Center, a small building that houses the Hebrew school.

There have been Jews in Bath since 1886, when a family named Mikelsky, passing through on the way to Boston, had to get off the train in a hurry because their child was sick. Locals were so nice to them that they stayed in Bath and built a community.

Personalities

Hiram Abrams, president of Paramount Pictures and then managing director of United Artists until his death in 1926, began his movie career by operating several silent film theaters in Portland.

As a war correspondent, journalist Shirley Povich, a native of Bath, sent dispatches from Marine battles at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. His son Maury is a television personality.

Non-Jewish Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1887) authored a poem about New England Jews. “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport” imagines sympathetically how “persecution, merciless and blind/ Drove o’er the sea—that desert desolate—/ These Ishmaels and Hagars of mankind.”

Books

Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development, by schoolteacher Benjamin Band, was commissioned by the Jewish Historical Society of Portland in 1955 as part of the national tercentenary celebration of Jewish settlement in America.

To get a feel for 19th-century Portland, pick up Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (Penguin) or one of her other story collections about the villagers and fisherfolk she watched from her parlor windows.

Recommendations

Shoppers travel great distances to the nearby village of Freeport, headquarters of L.L. Bean (www.llbean.com), famous outfitter for Maine weather.

For general travel information, consult the Convention and Visitors Bureau of Greater Portland (www.gotoportland.com) and Greater Portland Landmarks (207-774-5561); the latter will customize a tour of the city with special attention to Jewish sites.

The only kosher restaurant in the state of Maine—bear in mind that the treyf lobster is the official symbol of the state—is over two hours north, in Bangor. On Shabbat, visitors are welcome at Friday dinners at Chabad House. The Hannafords supermarket on Forest Avenue near the University of Southern Maine normally carries some fresh kosher meats as well as frozen chickens, plastic-packed deli meats and kosher hallas, and will special order meat in bulk. The Doubletree Hotel on Congress Street (www.doubletree.com) and The Fairfield Inn by Marriott on Park Avenue (www.marriott.com) are within walking distance from several synagogues including Chabad House.

Longfellow wrote fondly of this “beautiful town/ That is seated by the sea.” Jews who live in the Jerusalem of the North share his affection. Visitors will quickly see why.