

U.S. Synagogue Records

Synagogues have maintained several types of records, including congregational histories, minutes of meetings, lists of members and donors, and vital records such as birth, death, marriage, bar/bat mitzvah and confirmation. Not all synagogues had all types of records and many, if not most, records have been lost or destroyed. However, the records that do exist may provide useful genealogical information, especially if an ancestor was a rabbi or officer of the congregation.

Locating the Synagogue

Finding the synagogue your ancestors attended may be difficult. In small towns or cities with only a few synagogues, the local historical or genealogical society may be able to provide a list. In large cities, people often attended nearby synagogues or those associated with the town or region where they had lived.

New York and Beyond

- The best way to locate your ancestors' synagogue is to ask older relatives or through documents mentioning the synagogue, such as wedding or bar-mitzvah invitations, receipts, and tickets.
- If you know the name of a rabbi of the synagogue, there are several lists of rabbis and their congregations. The Rabbinical Council of America published a register of Orthodox rabbis for many years, containing lists of rabbis, their congregations and addresses. **AJHS BM 60 .R3**
- The yearbooks of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform rabbinic association, from 1890 to 1989, list Reform rabbis and their congregations in an appendix. **AJHS BM 11 .C2**
- *The American Jewish Yearbook 5668 (1907-1908)* (The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1907). This issue includes the comprehensive *Directory of National and Local Organizations in the United States* listing national and local Jewish organizations by city, including synagogues. In New York City, some congregations are also listed by associated home town as well as by the name of the congregation.

Genealogy Institute and REF DS 101 .A5

- City directories (pre-phone book listings of individuals, businesses, and their addresses) can provide the location of synagogues. Check the index in the directory to see where they may be listed – e.g. “Public Institutions”, “Churches”, etc. Also look under possible synagogue names (“Congregation”, “Temple”, etc.). In some directories rabbis may also be listed under “Clergymen.”
- Search CJH’s online catalogs at <http://search.cjh.org> by location (state, city) for publications specific to your area of interest. For example, *South New Jersey Synagogues* by Allen Meyers has extensive historical information on synagogues in that region. **AJHS BM 223 .N3 M2**
- Local Jewish genealogical and historical societies may have lists of old and existing synagogues. You can find a list of Jewish genealogical societies at <http://iajgs.org/members/members.html>
- The Board of Delegates of American Israelites Records, 1859-1881, 1887, 1932 (**AJHS 1-2**) contain surveys of member synagogues concerning the history and size of their congregation. The Board was the first organization to systematically record this type of information in the United States. The Delegates merged with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) in 1878 and dissolved in 1925.
- Records of the Synagogue Council of America (**AJHS 1-68**) contain documents from 1926 to 1982 and from 1990 to 1992. The organization disbanded in 1994. The documents concern efforts of the joint Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox communities to coordinate Jewish life and activities in America.

New York City Area

If you know where relatives were buried, the cemetery plot may have belonged to the synagogue.

- For the NYC metropolitan area, see <http://www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/new-york-ny/index.html> and www.jgsny.org/nycem.htm
- Israelowitz, Oscar *Synagogues of New York City* (Dover Publications, 1982) provides former synagogue locations in New York City. Because of the high synagogue concentration in many parts of the city, location alone may not be decisive, but the search may be narrowed if the ancestral community is also known. **REF BM 225 .N49 I 85**

- Fine, Jo Renee and Gerard R. Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side* (New York University Press, 1978) has photographs of many former synagogues. **REF NA 4690 .F5**
- *The Jewish Communal Register of New York City 1917-1918*. (Kehillah of New York City, 1918) lists congregations, addresses, membership, seats, projects (cemetery, sisterhood, etc.) in New York City – almost all Orthodox. It also names the president and gives a brief biography.
Genealogy Institute HV 3192 .N5

Finding the Records

If the synagogue still exists, contact them. If not, there are several repositories of synagogue records, including the Center for Jewish History. Most have only a few dozen, and in each case it is necessary to check catalogs carefully for all forms of the name, e.g. “Congregation...,” “Temple...,” “Anshe...,” “B’nai...,” “Bet ...,” etc.

- American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) has synagogue records among its Institutional manuscript collections, which can be found by searching CJH’s online catalog. **AJHS Collection I-154, New York Court Records, Selected Incorporation Papers, 1848-1920**, contains microfilmed documents that typically indicate the purpose of a proposed organization, the names of the petitioners, and the initial officers of the organization. A searchable online index to this collection may be found at www.cjh.org/collections/genealogy/onlinedbs.php.
- One can also search the Center for Jewish History’s archival finding aids at, <http://www.cjh.org/collections/findingaids.php?action=searchPartners&partner=1> to search terms such as, “U.S. Synagogue Records”. Records include that of the Temple Beth El of Birmingham, Mich. (**AJHS I-111**) These particular records offer incomplete sets of programs of confirmation services (1905-74); material on the Beth El College of Jewish Studies (1926-50); the Beth El annual-religious school yearbook (1953-66, 1969, 1971); Temple Yearbooks (1911-15, 1917-18, 1920-22, 1924-45); congregational by-laws (1942, 1966), Annual reports (1944-66); programs for special temple services and music festivals and miscellaneous material on other synagogue activities.

- YIVO Institute for Jewish Research has material on dozens of synagogues—search the CJH online catalogs at <http://search.cjh.org>
- FamilySearch.org , a non-profit service sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has microfilms of synagogue records from around the United States and United States territories, including synagogue records from St. Thomas. Search <https://familysearch.org/> (In the keyboard search string type: Jewish Congregation).
- American Jewish Archives, 3101 Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45220, (513) 221-1875. Synagogue records listed alphabetically by city.
www.americanjewisharchives.org/aja/FindingAids/Uahc.htm
- Jewish Theological Seminary, Joseph and Miriam Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, 3080 Broadway at 122nd St., New York City; (212) 678-8000. Records of Conservative synagogues, papers of Conservative rabbis dating from the early 19th century, oral histories, and over 4000 photographs. <http://www.jtsa.edu/x4736.xml>
- Yeshiva University Archives, 500 West 185th Street, New York, NY 10033; (212) 960-5451. Records of Orthodox congregations.
www.yu.edu/libraries/special_collections.asp
- NYC Municipal Archives, 31 Chambers St., New York City New York, NY 10007, (212) 788-8580. Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers Project Survey of State and Local Historical Records (1939) – Church Records includes synagogue records
www.nyc.gov/html/records/html/collections/collections_wpa.shtml