

Strangers to Neighbors

JEWISH LIFE ON NANTUCKET



Throughout the 18th century, thousands of Jewish families left their homes in Europe seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity in the emerging frontier that was America. Many from Spain and Portugal settled in Newport, Rhode Island, one of the oldest and most influential Jewish communities in the United States. In the mid 1700s a handful of enterprising Sephardic Jews developed commercial interests in Nantucket and, in so doing, played a large role in the success of the island's growing whaling industry.



It took another 100 years for the first Jewish families to put down roots in Nantucket, making it their home in the late 1800s. From there, a slow, yet sustained growth of a Jewish community on the island began to develop. However, another century would pass before a dedicated group of locals came together in July 1983, to establish the first Jewish Congregation, Shirat HaYam.



Now celebrating its 36th anniversary, the congregation, in partnership with the Nantucket Historical Association, proudly presents this tour of Jewish history and culture in Nantucket—the story of how the Jewish people, once considered strangers to the island, have taken an important and vibrant place in the life of the community—contributing greatly to the growth, success, and diverse interests of this unique island.



Still a surprise to newcomers and summer visitors, alike, Nantucket's year-round Jewish population is now a thriving part of the community. All who come to the island are welcomed at Shirat HaYam services and asked to introduce themselves, revealing a wide representation of people from all over the world.

Where we come from now:

Ontario, Canada
Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire
Connecticut, New Jersey, New York
Ohio, Indiana, Maryland, Pennsylvania
California, Montana, Washington, Utah
Mississippi, Washington, DC
Arizona, Florida, Texas



Where they came from:

Spain
Portugal
Poland
Russia

A historical photograph of a harbor scene. In the foreground and middle ground, numerous sailboats with white sails are anchored. In the background, a large steamship with a single dark smokestack is visible. The sky is a pale, hazy blue, and the water is calm. The overall tone is historical and serene.

Commercial Life

IN THE BEGINNING



1700 ~ 1800s



Aaron Lopez, 1731-1782
Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY

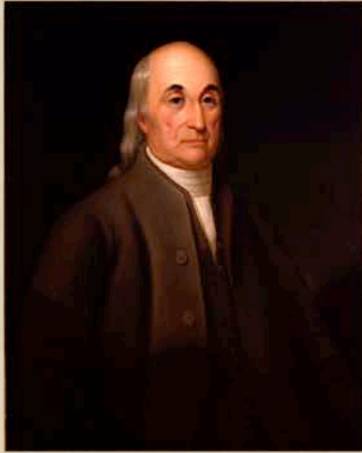
Jacob Rodriguez Rivera, 1717-1789
Courtesy of the Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, RI



Nantucket's early commercial success can be attributed, in part, to the talents of two Jewish men who arrived in Newport, Rhode Island in the mid 1700s. **Jacob Rodriguez Rivera** from Spain, thought by some to have brought with him the method of manufacturing spermaceti whale oil candles, and his nephew, and later son-in-law, **Aaron Lopez** from Portugal, established themselves as candle makers in 1748 and 1750, respectively. They formed a business partnership and later a trust with other merchants in order to control the price and distribution of spermaceti oil.



1700 ~ 1800s



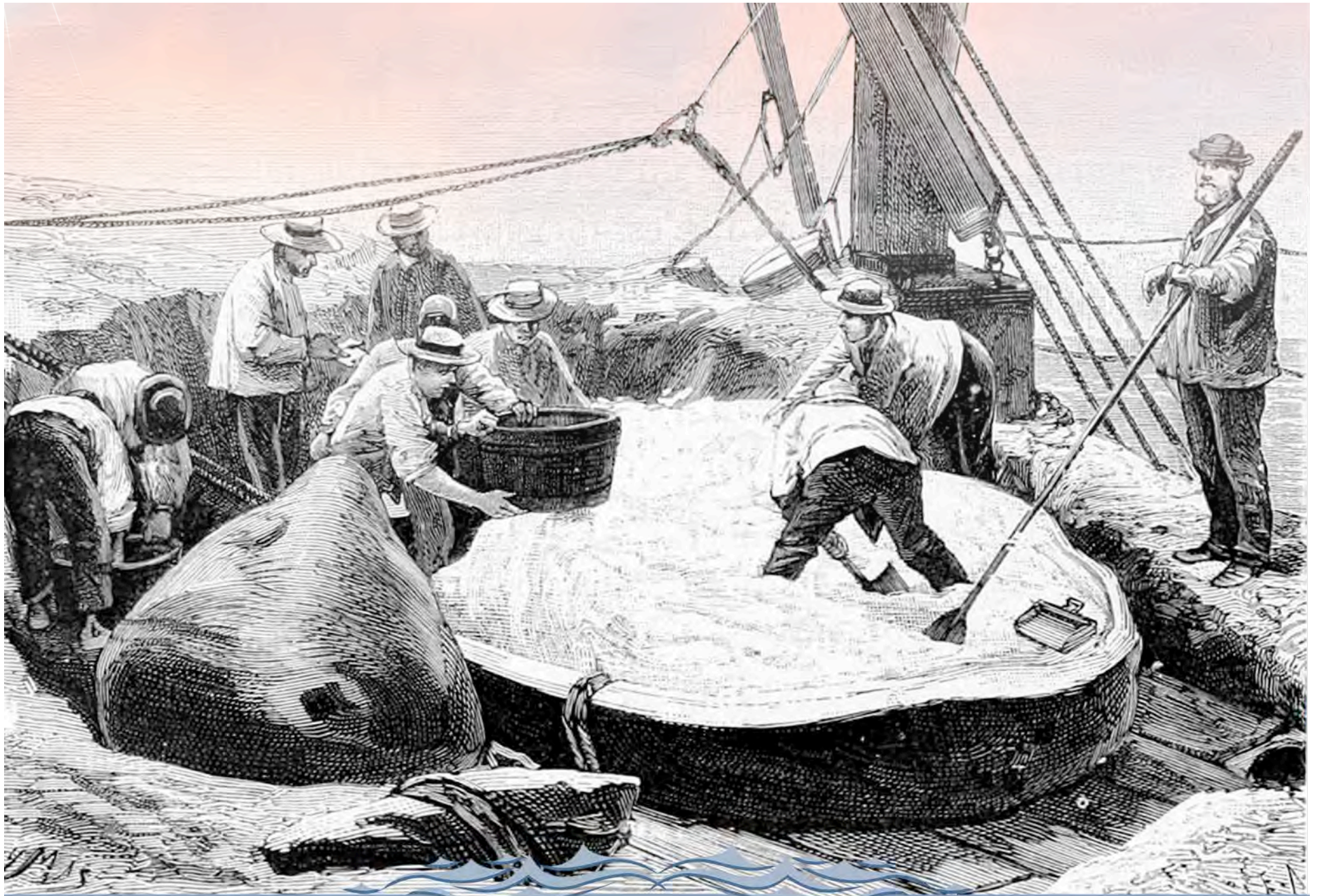
William Rotch Sr., 1734-1828
Courtesy of the New Bedford Free Public Library, New Bedford, MA

The trust included many of the major whaling companies, most notably **Joseph and William Rotch** of Nantucket.

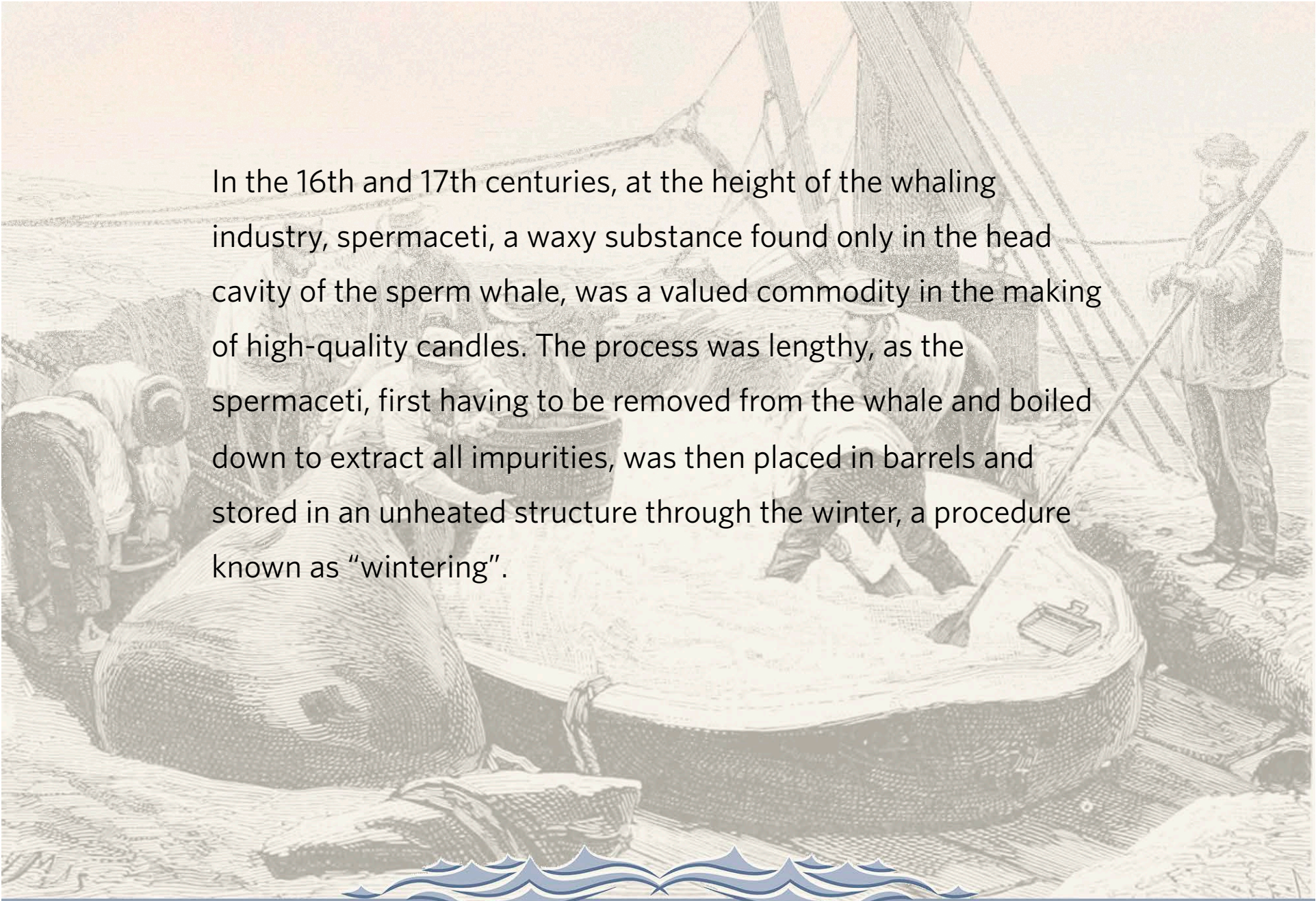
The financial interests of these men were similar; extending to the ownership of whale ships, the manufacture of textiles and the importation of chocolate and rum. However, the Jews who settled in Newport at that time were never able to find a welcoming home in Nantucket.



1700 ~ 1800s



1700 ~ 1800s



In the 16th and 17th centuries, at the height of the whaling industry, spermaceti, a waxy substance found only in the head cavity of the sperm whale, was a valued commodity in the making of high-quality candles. The process was lengthy, as the spermaceti, first having to be removed from the whale and boiled down to extract all impurities, was then placed in barrels and stored in an unheated structure through the winter, a procedure known as “wintering”.

1700 ~ 1800s



The substance, once hardened, was formed into spermaceti candles; the most coveted of all candles—burning brighter, cleaner and longer than any other.



1700 ~ 1800s

It wasn't until the late 1800s—more than 100 years later—that a few Jewish families were able to make a life for themselves on the island. **Mendle Rothenberg**, thought to be from either Poland or Russia, was one of the first, opening a dry goods store on Main Street called Rothenberg Brothers sometime in the 1870s. During this time, other Jewish families came and went, but Rothenberg stayed in business for 20 years before moving his family to San Francisco.



Mable and
Mendle Rothenberg

Photos Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association



ROTHENBERG'S
New Emporium
Opened Thursday, Dec. 1.
With a New, Fresh Stock of
DRY AND FANCY GOODS,
HATS, CAPS,
Gents' Furnishings,
NOTIONS, ETC.
Rare Bargains for the next 30 days in
HOLIDAY GOODS.
We have a fine line of
Ladies' Cloaks
AND
Woolen Blankets
Call and see us.
MENDLE ROTHENBERG.

1700 ~ 1800s



Commercial Life

THE EARLY YEARS



1900s

As the 1900s emerged, a handful of Jewish families were able to more firmly establish homes, businesses, and professional careers on the island.

Emile Genesky came to Nantucket from New Bedford in 1907 to run his family's clothing store, City Clothing Company. When a new building was constructed on the original site at 62-64 Main Street, Emile named the new store The Toggery Shop. Known for his kindness and welcoming smile, Emile owned the store until 1945 when he sold it to Philip Murray, whose family still owns it today.



Emile Genesky, in partnership with three other men, took over the development of the Dreamland Theatre, Nantucket's first movie house. The theater building, originally a Quaker meeting house, was floated across the harbor in 1906 (see above) to its present location.

Photo of Dreamland Theatre by Arnold S. Christie
Photos Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association



1900s

In 1914, **Henry and Mabel Rosen** from Poland, established a clothing store on the corner of Main and South Water Streets. In 1919, Henry also opened a grocery store selling crockery, kitchenware and furniture. For reasons unknown, the family left the island by 1930.

Dr. Jacob Fine came to Nantucket in 1927 offering temporary medical support. He stayed for three years, but practiced in the summer months on the island for eleven more.



Mabel and Henry Rosen's clothing store on the corner of Main and South Water Streets in 1914.



Dr. Jacob Fine

1900s

By the 1930s more Jewish families moved to Nantucket, including **Rose and Morris Bilsky** from New Bedford. Morris bought and ran the Beacon Cleaners and Dyers on Union Street and Rose opened the Roseby Shoppe on Main Street where she offered ready-to-wear apparel. The family remained until the Depression, then moved to New York.



Rose, Morris and daughter Estelle

Rose Bilsky sold apparel and did alterations at her Roseby Shoppe on Main Street, circa 1930s. Her sewing and tailoring talents were so well known, that her daughter was offered a part in the school play under the condition her mother would make all the costumes.

Photo Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association
Family Photo Courtesy of Jerry Gidman



**Estelle Bilsky
and Alan Genesky**

1900s



Commercial Life

THEN AND NOW

1900 ~ 2000s



Rose and Simon, known to everyone as Cy, worked side by side in the restaurant, later known as Cy's Green Coffee Pot. Their children pitched in when not in school, as did relatives who helped with the summer crowd. Cy Kaufman was friendly and gregarious—a perfect combination to attract the entire community to his establishment. As Dr. Fine remembers, "His place was popular with the locals or anyone else who wanted full value for his money—a place made to order even for the sparse patronage of the long off-season." When Cy died in his early sixties, his wife Rose, daughter Zelda, and son-in-law Milton Zlotin ran the restaurant for another thirteen years. In 1978 they sold the business and Zelda published the cookbook, *Once More at Cy's*.

"When I was alone and hungry I went around the corner to Cy Kaufman's café near the movie house on Federal Street. It was a family business in which the mother was the cook and the three children were harnessed for lesser duties."

Cy was a landmark. He had the shape of a beer barrel and a white apron across his effulgent mid-riff, meshing easily with the locals. He and his family worked together as many hours as were needed to survive. They were respected because they were decent honest people."

— Dr. Jacob Fine

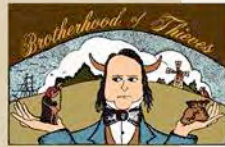
In 1934, Simon and Rose Kaufman came to Nantucket from New Bedford and, with a \$600 loan from Rose's father, opened the Green Coffee Pot Bar and Restaurant, later known as Cy's Green Coffee Pot.

1900 ~ 2000s



Morgan Levine and many Nantucket Lightship baskets lined up for sale at Four Winds Craft Guild.

Photo by Danitz Delmont



The Brotherhood of Thieves restaurant today and sign (above).



Morgan Levine, a man known for his fine esthetics, historical appreciation, and academic savvy, came to Nantucket and in 1951 opened the Four Winds Craft Guild. In 1983, he became the first president of the then, newly formed Jewish Congregation.

Arty Krause, a young Jewish artist, bought the building at 23 Broad Street in 1970 when he was just 24 years old and, in 1972, opened the popular restaurant The Brotherhood of Thieves.



1900 ~ 2000s



The Boarding House

In 1978, Nantucket's present-day sheriff, Jim Perelman purchased the Boarding House and, in the early 80s, owned and operated a delicatessen with Myra Fein on South Water Street.



1900 ~ 2000s



Chef Greg Margolis with wife, **Joy** behind him, demonstrating his talents at their establishment, The Nantucket Culinary Center. Today, the Center is a campus of creativity—a literal beehive of activity where on any given day you'll find a local fishmonger mixing it up with cooking school students... entrepreneurs playing music and reciting poetry, people of all ages breaking bread and making plans down in the café, and a classroom kitchen filled with amazing food that literally lights up the night with laughter and comradery.

Mission Statement: Joy Margolis

Elliot Gould and **Jeremy and Alex Leventhal** dreamed up Nantucket's hottest new hotel, The Greydon House.



In the 90s, after the revitalization of the waterfront, Jewish businesses continued to grow and thrive on the island. Today they include several restaurants, retail shops, antique stores and real estate firms, as well as the Nantucket Culinary Center and The Corner Table Café, The Nantucket Hotel, the Greydon House, Four Winds Gifts, Nantucket Wine Festival, and 97.7 ACK FM; Nantucket's radio station.



1900 ~ 2000s



Chef Greg Margolis with wife, **Joy** behind him, demonstrating his talents at their establishment, The Nantucket Culinary Center. Today, the Center is a campus of creativity—a literal beehive of activity where on any given day you'll find a local fishmonger mixing it up with cooking school students... entrepreneurs playing music and reciting poetry, people of all ages breaking bread and making plans down in the café, and a classroom kitchen filled with amazing food that literally lights up the night with laughter and comradery.

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Additionally, Jewish lawyers, doctors, writers, journalists, artists, musicians, builders, and professionals of all kinds have made a life here, all adding to the enrichment of the island's cultural and commercial success.



1900 ~ 2000s



*The determination of the Jews...to express their identity
is well documented and the story of Nantucket Jewry
deserves a place in the annals of our people...*

— M. Frumkin, East Meadow, NY in response to the New York Times, 1983

Religion

FIRST FORMAL SERVICE



For many years Jews on Nantucket lived without any Sabbath services, rabbis, formal observations of the traditions of Judaism or a sense of a Jewish community on the island. They passed on their Jewish traditions at home and sought religious and spiritual comfort in Christian houses of worship.

With great excitement, the first formal service took place on July 8, 1983 in the Grange Hall on North Liberty Street with 150 people in attendance. As one congregant stated, "It was astonishing to be there and to see the kinds of people who showed up...they realized they were brethren and people you would never have dreamed were Jewish."



"June 12. Today, we met with **Claire and Michael Maitino** (I called them 'my catalytic agents') to finally draw up some plans for the first meeting of nantucket's Jewish community." — Sarah Levine, The New York Times



The service was organized by the Nantucket Jewish Community Organization, who chose a format that would be comfortable for a religiously diverse Jewish community. The children recited the Kiddush (the blessing over wine); all were encouraged to contribute to the Tzedakah (charity) basket, the proceeds of which were donated to the Nantucket Counseling Center. The new congregation was named Shirat HaYam (Song of the Sea) by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner from New York.



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As the Jewish community increased in size and began to develop a cohesive and active religious organization, the congregation focused on a set of activities, which remain essential to its membership today.

Perhaps the most significant is the celebration of Jewish holidays.

Lawrence Witten lights candles on a menorah in celebration of the Jewish holiday of **Hanukkah**.



CHALLENGES FACING SHIRAT HAYAM





During its history the congregation has faced challenges. Early on, tensions built between those who desired a rigorous commitment to Judaism and others taking a more casual approach to the services.





Irving Rosenthal

Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor



In later years the congregation worked to strike a balance between rabbinical and lay leadership. From 1987 to 1994, Irving Rosenthal served the congregation as president and lay leader followed by several rabbis who guided the congregation in the 90s.

Today, Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor serves as Shirat HaYam's year-round spiritual guide.





A reading and discussion of the *Book of Jonah* during an afternoon service of **Yom Kippur** held at the Nantucket Whaling Museum.

Anti-Semitism exists everywhere in the world and Nantucket is no different. In the past, Jewish people on the island were excluded from some organizations, had difficulty purchasing homes and were not welcome in some hotels. Having Shirat HaYam recognized, accepted and valued by the Nantucket community is not without its challenges, but as the Jewish population on the island continues to grow, so too does the strength and purpose of the congregation within the community.





On July 19, 2013 the **Shirat HaYam** congregation unveiled a sign on the Unitarian Universalist Church announcing the location of Jewish services.

Photo by Jack Weinhold

As a part of a resort community it is important to the congregation that they welcome those who are only on the island for a few months out of the year and, in so doing, find a balance, especially during the summer months, between religious, spiritual, educational, and social activities.



A reading and discussion of the Book of Jonah during an afternoon service of **Yom Kippur** held at the Nantucket Whaling Museum.



At present, the Nantucket congregation includes over 240 families, a rich mix of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews and others who identify with, or are interested in Judaism, who meet every Friday night from Memorial Day through the High Holidays and informally from October through April.



JEWISH CEMETERY

Establishing a cemetery is one of the first priorities of a new Jewish community. According to Jewish tradition, Jewish burial grounds are sacred sites and must remain undisturbed in perpetuity.

The Nantucket Jewish Cemetery Association was founded in 1987 and consecrated in accordance with Jewish law. The Nantucket Jewish cemetery is now under the umbrella of Shirat HaYam.





Education





Friday night Shabbat service presented by the **Religious School** students, a yearly spring occurrence. This service highlights and celebrates the children's progress during the academic year.

Photos by Jack Weinhold and Gary Langley

Jewish culture engages in, promotes, and values lifelong learning.

For this reason, education for both adults and children is a valued component of what Shirat HaYam strives to offer its members.

Early in the life of the congregation, Rabbi Joseph Pollack from Boston University took a two-year sabbatical to teach basic Judaism and the study of the weekly Torah on Nantucket. His wife, Raizel taught Hebrew.



The **Torah**, or Jewish Written Law, consists of the five books of the Hebrew Bible—known more commonly as the "Old Testament"—that were given by G-d to Moses on Mount Sinai and include within them all of the biblical laws of Judaism. The ceremonial Torah or the Torah housed in synagogue and temple arks is written by hand on parchment by a learned Jewish scholar or scribe. Readings from the Torah form an important part of Jewish liturgical services.



Religious classes for young children began in 1990 and, in 1999, Educator, Avi Teken was hired to formalize and teach a religious curriculum for children. This enables them to learn about Jewish History, Jewish Holidays, and the Old Testament.

The Shirat HaYam curriculum also includes the study of the Hebrew language and the preparation for Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

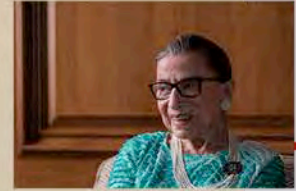


PROGRAMS

The Friday Night Speaker's Program, created by Robin Bernstein, one of Shirat HaYam's past presidents, allows members of the congregation to hear from, and engage in discussions with prominent Jewish thinkers, journalists, authors, and politicians—the purpose being to highlight Jewish contributions to the world of art, literature, music, politics, and science.

Ruth Bader Ginsberg; first ever female Jewish justice nominated to the Supreme Court known widely for her fiery liberal dissents and advocacy for the advancement of gender equality and women's rights.

Photo by Ariel Zornick/NPR



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Photo by Ariel Zambelitz/NPR



Carl Bernstein, an investigative journalist and author, most predominantly known for his news reporting of the Watergate scandal during 1972 to 1974.

Photo by Brad Baker



PROGRAMS

Speakers in the past have included Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, NBC correspondent David Gregory, Senator Joseph Lieberman, Carl Bernstein, Vermont Governor Madeleine Kunin, and author Anita Diamant.

Ruth Bader Ginsberg; first ever female Jewish justice nominated to the Supreme Court known widely for her fiery liberal dissents and advocacy for the advancement of gender equality and women's rights.

Photo by Ariel Zambach/NPR



Carl Bernstein; an investigative journalist and author, most predominantly known for his news reporting of the Watergate scandal during 1972 to 1974.

Photo by Brad Baker

Anita Diamant; author of many best-selling novels including *The Red Tent*, a biblical story filled with historical figures from the Old Testament.

Photo by David Roberts



Joseph Lieberman; lobbyist, attorney, former U.S. Senator from Connecticut and nominee for Vice President of the U.S. in the 2000 election.

Photo by Yuri Gripov/Reuters



PROGRAMS

In 2014, Shirat HaYam's Education Committee created a Scholar-in-Residence program to invite two scholars per year to teach topics related to Judaism: the Torah, Gomorrah, Jewish history, philosophy, art, music, literature and Israeli politics.

During the first several years of the program, Rabbi Reuven Cohen, a biblical and Talmudic scholar, led discussions outlining some of the great ideas from the Talmud and the Mishnah.

Imam Abdullah Antepli;
Chief Representative for
Muslim Affairs and
Adjunct Faculty of Islamic
Studies at Duke University.
Several years ago, he
conducted both religious
services and discussions
with Shirat HaYam and the
Muslim community.



Madeleine Kunin; author
of *Living a Political Life*,
former Deputy Secretary
of the U.S. Department
of Education, former
U.S. Ambassador to
Switzerland, and former
Governor from Vermont.



PROGRAMS

Recently, biblical scholar Dr. Joel Hoffman talked about stories and ideas that had been removed from the Bible.

Each year the Leonard E. Greenberg Memorial Scholar-in-Residence weekend is led by influential rabbis and other scholars. In 2018, Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, named one of the most influential rabbis in America by Newsweek magazine, spoke on social justice and contemporary political issues.

Imam Abdullah Antepli; Chief Representative for Muslim Affairs and Adjunct Faculty of Islamic Studies at Duke University. Several years ago, he conducted both religious services and discussions with Shirat HaYam and the Muslim community.



Madeleine Kunin; author of *Living a Political Life*, former Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, former U.S. Ambassador to Switzerland, and former Governor from Vermont.

David Gregory; CNN political analyst and former NBC news correspondent is one of Shirat HaYam's many guest speakers.





Community Outreach





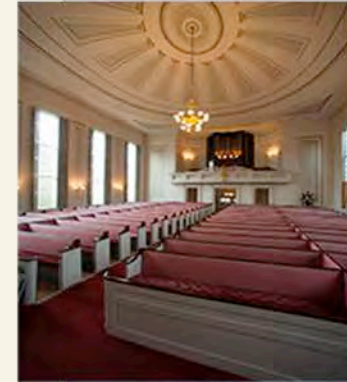
Among Jewish populations worldwide, there is a strong imperative to contribute to one's community...



...and to serve in organizations whose purpose it is to help improve community life.

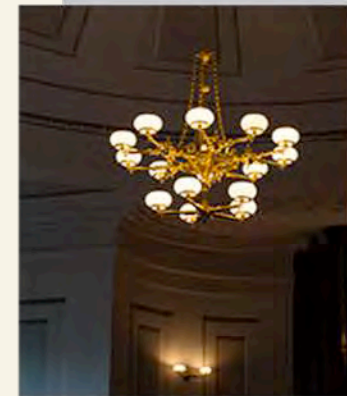
The final words in Shirat HaYam's mission statement, "to enhance the quality of life of the greater community," fully embraces this belief.

As a religious organization, Shirat HaYam participates in activities that fulfill this imperative, making substantial contributions to the South Church Preservation Fund, Nantucket Food, Fuel, and Rental Assistance Program, local theater productions, and the Nantucket Book Festival, to name a few.



The Congregation funded the replacement of lighting fixtures and chandelier during the restoration of the South Church interior, spiritual home of Shirat HaYam.

Photos by Jack Weinstock and Gary Langley



Individuals that should be noted date back to the early 1900s when Henry Rosen made a substantial contribution to the Red Cross during the War Effort. His was the first charitable donation ever recorded by a Jewish person on the island.

Cy Kaufman, from Cy's Green Coffee Pot, also gave generously to the island and, as his obituary stated, "He was known for his many contributions to charitable organizations regardless of race or creed."



Through the years, individual members of the congregation have supported and/or sponsored events for many Not-For-Profit organizations in the community. In 2018, congregants from Shirat HaYam participated in Swim Across America. The money raised was donated to support cancer treatment and patient care at Nantucket Cottage Hospital.



Shirat HaYam congregants participate in the 2018 Swim Across America, raising funds to support cancer treatment and patient care at Nantucket Cottage.

Photo: An Eliza Olszewski

In commemoration of its 30th anniversary, the **Shirat HaYam Congregation** planted two American elms at the head of Main Street—the original trees from the 1800s needed to be replaced.

Photo: Courtesy of The Inquirer and Mirror



LEADERSHIP

Since the early 1900s, Jews who settled in Nantucket began to assume leadership positions in the community. In 1918, Emile Genesky, original owner of The Toggery Shop, was elected to the Nantucket Board of Selectmen and later, appointed Special Justice of the then newly created Nantucket District Court.

Milton Zlotin, second owner of Cy's Green Coffee Pot, was a Nantucket District Court officer for 26 years, an officer of The Isle of The Sea, and an officer of the VFW.



Sarah and Morgan Levine

Morgan, the first president of Shirat HaYam, was a tireless champion of improving the historical integrity of Nantucket's public spaces. He had clear, visual ideas and a wealth of historical resources to guide him as he initiated the change in the look of downtown storefronts, the redesign of public lighting and the introduction of wooden trash barrels, sidewalk benches and public signs—all small, yet significant restoration projects that contributed to the charm of the historic district then, and now.



As a well-respected businessman, Bernard Grossman was elected president of the Nantucket Cottage Hospital in 1979. He was also a Selectman, board member of the Nantucket Electric Company, and helped to found Small Friends of Nantucket. Most notably, he was the Nantucket representative to the Steamship Authority's Board of Governors for 20 years. After his death, his wife, Grace served on the Steamship Board, the first woman to ever do so. In 1990, she was responsible for organizing the fund drive to save Cape Cod Community College in the face of steep state budget cuts.



Bernie Grossman, Nantucket Selectman and Nantucket representative to the Steamship Authority's Board of Governors, sits in as the dealer at the blackjack table at the Shipwreck Ball.

Photo by John W. McClellan

The Nantucket Cottage Hospital, circa 1960s

Photos Above Courtesy of Nantucket Historical Association



Today, members of the Jewish community continue to lend their time, efforts, and considerable expertise in order to insure the financial and mission-based success of all major charitable institutions and organizations.





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