

# SAVING AND PRAISING THE PAST

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We are gathered here today in a beautifully restored synagogue to celebrate its rebirth as the Museum at Eldridge Street. While it still has an active congregation, this synagogue will now provide visitors with the opportunity to revisit the past, to praise the memory of the numberless Jewish immigrants who landed on our shores and established a new home in what was for them, an alien land. This nation's promise embodied in the First Amendment to our Constitution, the separation of church and state, offered these newcomers the opportunity to openly erect a grand edifice in which they could carry out the tenets of their faith and create what became a distinctly American Jewish identity. But I would like to suggest that we are here to celebrate something perhaps more profound and certainly more elusive than the preservation of a building—it is the reclamation and preservation of memory. My remarks will focus on the important role places of worship play as repositories of memories—of history that is the foundation upon which the future is built. The great Yiddish and Hebrew poet, Isaac Leib Peretz, provides a *leitmotif*, a theme that underlies my remarks about the importance of preserving our nation's historic religious properties: "A people's memory is history, and as a man [and woman] without memory, so a people without a history cannot grow wiser, better."

Bill Moyers, in a speech entitled "In Remembrance is the Secret of Redemption," presented at the dinner celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, made a similar observation: "Every synagogue is a means of keeping alive the Jewish consciousness, but this one's mission of memory is unique in the world. Four-fifths of today's American Jews descends from that wave of eastern European refugees who came in that exodus (between 1881–1924). The Eldridge Street Synagogue connects these generations physically to one another."

A people's memory and thus its history are transmitted in different forms: stories repeated orally or written in texts; images created in a variety of media; and buildings. Yes, buildings have many stories to tell. As Bill Moyers remarked in his speech about the people who erected the Eldridge Street Synagogue: "They published in brick and mortar. Go there and read." Religious buildings often are the most verbal for they are capable of making a collective statement about the people who built and used them—about a community of like-minded people and their time and place in history.

Monumental religious architecture, whether the great temples built by the Greeks and Romans, or the Cathedrals of the Medieval Period, or more recently, St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, have always drawn the interest of scholars and tourists alike. Their histories, and that of their builders, have been carefully studied and documented. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the worship spaces of ordinary folks with the not too surprising result that often their histories remain untold and unknown. Their houses of worship as they age bereft of scholars, tourists, and often worshippers, fall into decay and then disappear. This lacuna is not limited to the sacred spaces of the Jewish people; this omission is true with other faiths whose places of worship do not fit into the hallowed canon of architectural history either because the buildings are modest in size, lack aesthetic importance, or were erected by a minority ethnic or religious community. Also contributing to a lack of interest in preserving these buildings is the ethos expressed by many faith groups: "the church/synagogue is the people, not the building." Nevertheless, one of the first acts of an immigrant group once it is established is to erect a place of worship. A priest writing about a German immigrant community in rural Minnesota emphatically notes at the beginning of his study that "People, not buildings, make a parish."

But further on he observes, "No village would be complete without a church, no matter how poor they [the people] might have been and how modest their church." He continues, "...as the parish prospered and its members' dwellings became grander, so, too, did God's house, because the church was the visible expression of God dwelling among them."

In this nation where there is a separation between church and state and where there is a smorgasbord of religions and congregations to choose from, competition for members can become quite heated. One way to attract new members is to erect an impressive house of worship where people could escape the chaos of their crowded tenements and neighborhoods and find sanctuary in the beauty of God's house. Furthermore, members were often needed to offset the expense of the land and construction of a building. That certainly was case for the Eldridge Street Synagogue; the building and land cost over \$91,000, and there were only 175 members to cover the costs; the sanctuary, however, optimistically sat 740. Or as one historian observed about the synagogue: "the attention garnered by an opulent new building might well serve to establish the prominence of the congregation and help the congregation reach out to newcomers."

To fully understand what the preservation and restoration of the Eldridge Street Synagogue represents, it is important to look back on the history of the preservation movement in the United States. Until the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the nation's preservation movement was dominated, according to one historian, "...by the white, female, upper-class and elite elements of society." Or as these women were sarcastically described in the *New Yorker Magazine*, "blue-rinsed ladies in tennis shoes." These women were members of organizations such as the National Society of the Colonial Dames and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Needless to say, their focus was on sites such as Mount Vernon, Williamsburg and Jamestown, and picturesque colonial churches on New England's village greens. The National Park Service entered the picture in the 1930s and in 1935 Congress passed the Historic Sites Act and a survey of sites and buildings was begun, but once again the criteria were buildings of national historic significance, eliminating the vernacular buildings erected by the majority of the nation's population. The National Trust for Historic Preservation was created in 1949, ironically at the time the nation was entering the prosperous post-war era, a period that has

been described as "...unashamed self-indulgence" when "...historic resources were under siege." Urban renewal became popular, with the result that many historic neighborhoods were torn down to make room for housing developments and shopping malls surrounded by acres of asphalt. Flight to the suburbs resulted in the abandonment of many historic houses of worship erected by immigrants, and with their loss went their untold stories, stories that comprise an important part of our nation's patrimony, its memory.

What finally alerted Americans to what they were losing was the effort underway in Europe to repair and rebuild its cities and towns following the ravages of World War II. Europe's past was lost due to war; we were losing our past due to our own arrogance. In 1945, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was established to provide an international forum in which views on preservation philosophy and practice could be discussed and disseminated; the United States was a founding member. The impact of UNESCO on American preservationists was enormous, but slow in developing; it didn't take hold until twenty years later when the U.S. Conference of Mayors organized a Special Committee on Historic Preservation that produced a report under the title *With Heritage So Rich* that ultimately led to the passage in 1966 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The report's introduction states: "We do not use bombs and powder kegs to destroy irreplaceable structures related to the story of America's civilization. We use the corrosion of neglect or the thrust of bulldozers." Its conclusion relates directly to the preservation of structures such as the Eldridge Street Synagogue: "In sum, if we wish to have a future with greater meaning, we must concern ourselves not only with the historic highlights, but we must be concerned with the total heritage of the nation and all that is worth preserving from our past as a living part of the present." As a result of the report, the concept of significance for placement on the National Register of Historic Places was now broadened to include architecture and culture! The inclusion of these two categories provided a rationale for recognizing historic religious structures, such as The Eldridge Street Synagogue that now has Landmark status. Another synagogue I will discuss that benefited from this change and is on the National Register of Historic Places, is currently undergoing restoration. This modest structure is at the other end of the grandeur scale, B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Virginia, MN,

located on Minnesota's Iron Range. These two synagogues illustrate that large or small, plain or fancy, our nation's houses of worship are important cultural and historic artifacts—their brick and mortar embody memories of the immigrants who came to our nation's shores and found sanctuary in a crowded urban ghetto such as the one on New York's Lower East Side, or bravely ventured west to settle in a remote, isolated region of the Upper Midwest.

"Interest in early American synagogue architecture is still in its infancy," proclaimed *Preservation News* in July 1984. This was the situation nearly twenty years after the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act. The question is why? Upwardly mobile Jews living in urban areas will often sell their synagogue buildings to new arrivals in their neighborhoods, often African Americans who transform them into churches. Perhaps the original congregants will take a stained glass window or other artifact from their old building to be incorporated in the new one built in a suburb, but generally the building is simply abandoned with no effort to document its appearance or to record its history. In small towns, the situation is often different. Rarely are these buildings reused by another faith; rather they are simply abandoned, remodeled for other use, or demolished. When I have met with congregants to discuss a possible appropriate reuse for their synagogue, I am met with resistance. This was the case with the B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Virginia, MN, erected in 1908 by early Jewish settlers on Minnesota's remote Iron Range.

A brief history of Jewish settlement on the Range will put this congregation and its synagogue into its historical context and make clear why this building is worthy of preservation and restoration. Iron ore was discovered in the region northwest of Duluth in the 1890s. Twenty years later the area was booming with over 65,000 inhabitants; 1,000 were Jewish. At this time, Minnesota's total population was two million; of that number 13,000 were Jewish with most residing in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. On the Range, the vast majority of the Jewish residents were merchants who had shops on the main streets of all of the Range's small communities, but tended to congregate in four of the larger towns: Chisholm, Eveleth, Hibbing (where Bob Zimmerman's family settled), and Virginia. Each of these towns had a synagogue, but Virginia's is the only one still extant. Virginia was the Range's market center and was nicknamed "Queen City" because of the wealthy mine



*A 1908 view of Congregation B'nai Abraham, an example of vernacular religious architecture.*

operators and owners who lived there. As the town prospered so too did its Jewish community who in 1910 numbered 121 residents out of a population of nearly 10,500. By 1908 they could afford to erect the Range's most elaborate synagogue. [Parenthetically, Hibbing and Eveleth's synagogues were former clapboard Gothic Revival churches, and Chisholm's was a modest frame structure demolished in the 1960s.] The red brick neo-Romanesque synagogue with its stained glass windows caused quite a sensation in Virginia. It was described in the local press at the time of its dedication as the "finest church [sic] on the Range", which it was as all of the contemporary local churches were simple clapboard structures with plain glass windows.

None of the congregations on the Range employed a full-time rabbi, but all considered themselves Orthodox. Each had a "learned" man who prepared the boys for their *b'nai mitzvot*, and Chisholm even had a, a *shochet*, who provided kosher chickens. B'nai Abraham's women's auxiliary, THE SUNSHINE CLUB, was both a social and philanthropic organization, sponsoring card parties as well as providing care for its members in need. Although participating in their town's civic activities, including running for public office, the Jewish residents tended to socialize among themselves, participating in national Jewish organizations such as B'nai Brith and Hadassah. When the Depression hit in the 1930s, the need for iron ore diminished, and many Jewish merchants closed their shops and departed for larger urban areas. Those that remained prospered when a recovery of sorts occurred during and following World War II, but by that time many of their children had left the Range for jobs elsewhere. The synagogues continued to function, but by the 1980s all except B'nai Abraham were closed and either demolished or transformed into a residence. It was at this

time that I heard about the synagogue in Virginia and became concerned about its fate. The building was placed on the National Register in 1983, and although the handful of elderly members who remained expressed interest in the future of the building, they felt very strongly that if it could no longer be used as a synagogue, it should be demolished. They were literally praying for a miracle that would see a revival of Jewish life on the Range such as happened during the 1940s that would result in new members joining their synagogue. The chances of this occurring were remote, to say the very least. Today, the Jewish population on the Iron Range can literally be counted on two hands. Although the Virginia Area Historical Society expressed interest in using the structure as a museum and cultural center, the congregants remained adamant about their desire to see the building remain in use as a synagogue. What I was able to do in the 1980s was take students from the University of Minnesota up to the Range to thoroughly photograph and document the synagogues, including the closed ones, conduct archival research on the Jewish community, and interview members, past and present of the synagogues, as well as their non-Jewish neighbors. In this way I felt that if all the synagogues were lost and their members gone, at the very least the memory of the Range's once vibrant Jewish community would be documented.

It was at this time that I became aware of others who were trying to preserve historic synagogues in the USA, in particular Gerard R. Wolfe, a professor at NYU who was ahead of the preservation curve when it came to synagogues. In 1971 he was able to gain access to the Eldridge Street Synagogue's sanctuary that had not been in use since the mid-1950s and was overwhelmed by its beauty and alarmed at its condition. He formed the Friends of Eldridge Street Synagogue and successfully raised enough money to stabilize the structure. In the 1980s, at about the same time I was struggling to raise interest in preserving B'nai Abraham, Roberta Brandes Gratz, a preservationist and journalist, started the Eldridge Street Project and began the daunting task of raising millions of dollars to preserve and restore the historic synagogue. I believe we both recognized that one of the first tasks we had to undertake if we wanted to see these buildings preserved was to educate the public regarding their importance as repositories of memory and history. In collaboration with the University of Minnesota, where I was then teaching, and the National Conference of Christians

and Jews, Inc., I formed the Center for the Documentation and Preservation of Religious Architecture in 1987. In 1991 the Center was presented with the Award for a Model Initiative by Partners for Sacred Places, an off-shoot of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, for its efforts to document places of worship and its educational programs, including a conference at the University of Minnesota in 1989 that had the same title as this presentation: "Saving and Praising the Past." National experts, such as the historian and theologian Martin Marty from the University of Chicago, and international speakers, such as Bezalel Narkiss, founder of The Centre for Jewish Art at Hebrew University in Jerusalem that was overseeing the documentation of synagogue remains in Europe, shared with the public the importance of preserving religious properties. The Center and the conference did raise people's awareness of the historic religious sites in their midst and did result in concerted efforts to preserve a number of religious buildings, however, it had little impact on the Jewish community in Virginia. The synagogue remained in use, but was suffering from deferred maintenance. How long it would survive intact remained an issue.

In November of 1990, I was invited to speak at a conference at Hebrew Union College in New York entitled, "The Future of Jewish Monuments". It was here that I met Roberta Gratz and had an opportunity to visit the Eldridge Street Synagogue. To say I was overwhelmed with what I saw and the enormous task that Roberta had undertaken is an understatement. But her enthusiasm and optimism in face of what would appear to be insurmountable odds, gave me the encouragement to continue my attack on the windmills I faced in Virginia, MN. While the two buildings we were trying to preserve were dramatically different in scale and degree of decay, our tasks were similar—to raise awareness and then to raise restoration funds. Could it be done? Not long after this conference, the National Trust for Historic Preservation contacted me and asked if I would be interested in writing a book that would feature historic places of worship that reflected our nation's great ethnic and religious diversity. It was hoped that such a publication would make the public aware of how these buildings erected by our immigrant forebearers were part of our country's patrimony. I accepted the offer and in 1997, the Trust published my book *America's Religious Architecture: Sacred Places for Every Community*. Featured in that book are the Eldridge Street and B'nai Abraham Synagogues; obviously

I had my own agenda. One immediate result of the book's publication was that state historical societies and preservation organizations began to include sessions at their conferences that focused on preserving religious properties. I had the opportunity to speak at many of these and was pleased at the interest that was expressed in these too often ignored buildings. The public's education was advancing.

While the Eldridge Street Project progressed, slowly but steadily, B'nai Abraham's future remained uncertain. Periodically I would check on its condition, write an article for the local and national press in the increasingly forlorn hope that folks in the local Jewish community would come forward to save the building. I already had the support and interest of the state's preservation office, but as long as the building remained a functioning synagogue, there was little that could be done. It took a small disaster and a minor miracle in 2003, twenty years after my first effort to save the building, for this to finally happen. In the late 1990s, the congregation was down to two members: one was in a Virginia nursing home suffering from dementia, the other a retired 90 year old doctor who wanted to move to Minneapolis to be near his son. In 2003, he decided that he would try to sell the building, or have it demolished salvaging the stained glass windows for future sale. His son, seeking advice regarding its sale, contacted me, as I had spoken to his father on several occasions, as well as the director of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest. A member of the Society's board was married to the son of one of the congregation's founders. It was the imminent threat of the building's sale and/or demolition that finally spurred him and other descendants of congregants to take action. A visit to the building was arranged; what we saw was heartbreaking. The good doctor had forgotten to turn the water off one winter and the pipes burst; the walls and floor were covered with mold; prayer books, *kipot*, and *tallit* found on the floor and shoved on shelves were in various stages of decay. There were even half-filled bottles of kosher wine aging in the kitchen where dishes were strewn around. The doctor also neglected to tell anyone that he had all the benches ripped out of the sanctuary and had given them to a small Orthodox synagogue in Minneapolis, including seats with the names of donors whose descendants were now concerned about the building's future. The little synagogue was rapidly going to ruin. As a result of the visit, former congregants, descendants of congregants, and other interested individuals

formed an advocacy organization to explore the feasibility of restoring the synagogue for use as a heritage center celebrating Jewish history and culture on the Range, and to serve as a venue for educational programs, retreats, and other community events. I was invited to serve on the board as its historical consultant, a position I gladly accepted. The group, called the Friends of B'nai Abraham Synagogue, incorporated as a 501(c) 3 organization in 2004, and succeeded in acquiring ownership of the building. A grant was received from the MN Historical Society to conduct a feasibility study to determine if the building could be preserved and adapted for reuse, and to interview community leaders in Virginia to see if there was interest in its reuse. The study's conclusion was that the building was basically sound and could be restored. The Virginia community enthusiastically supported the effort to the degree that the Virginia Area Historical Society agreed to administer the building and use it as a venue for exhibits and programs, and the Virginia Foundation pledged to commit funds towards its restoration. The Friends began to write grants and solicit donations and within two years raised nearly \$200,000, a considerable sum considering the size of the project and the funding pool they could draw upon. Like Eldridge Street, the Friends group plan to change the project's name; it will be known as the B'nai Abraham Cultural Center and Museum. The restoration of the building is nearly complete; all that remains to be done, when funds are available, is to remove the unsightly 1950s addition to the front façade and restore it to its original appearance. The building is now completely handicap accessible and will open this summer with a series of cultural programs, including Teachers' Seminars sponsored by the MN Humanities Commission, and a permanent exhibit documenting the history of Jewish settlement on the Range. But like the Eldridge Street Synagogue, it will continue to be a Jewish house of worship. In this way it will fulfill the dream of its last members who hoped to see their building continue to function as a synagogue. The *Aron ha Kodesh* and *bimah* remain in the sanctuary, and youth groups from Twin Cities synagogues and schools will make pilgrimages to the synagogue with their Torah Scrolls to conduct Sabbath services, and to be made aware of the Jewish immigrants who a century ago bravely set forth into the wilderness to establish a new life in the New World, and regardless of the challenges they faced, did not abandon their ancient traditions. The walls of this old building will echo once again

with the voices of young people; its bricks and mortar, like the bricks and mortar of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, will continue to connect generations. Yes, a people's memory is history, and without our history we cannot grow wiser, better. Buildings, like these two historic synagogues, resonate with memories, they do speak to us, their voices must continue to be heard so the memory of those who came before us is never lost. Let it be so.



**These photos show Bnai Abraham's sanctuary before and after restoration.**

## WORKS ON WHICH THIS COMMENT DRAWS

Marilyn J. Chiat, *America's Religious Architecture: Sacred Places for Every Community*. 1997.

Antoinette J. Lee. "Discovering Old Cultures in the New World: The Role of Ethnicity," in *The American Mosaic: Preserving a Nation's Heritage*. 1987.

W. Brown Morton III, "What Do We Preserve and Why?" in *The American Mosaic*.

Bill Moyers. "In Remembrance is the Secret of Redemption," *Common Bond*, reprint, December 5, 1988.

United States Department of the Interior. National Park Service. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form. Eldridge Street Synagogue. 1996.

Vincent Arthur Yzermans. *The Spirit in Central Minnesota: A Centennial Narrative of the Church of St. Cloud: 1889-1989*. 1990.

Research on Range Jewry was conducted by students enrolled in classes taught by the author at the University of Minnesota from 1983-1986. Research material is stored in the archives of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, Andersen Library, University of Minnesota.