

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

DEC 23 1988

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property Touro Synagogue National Historic Site  
historic name Touro Synagogue  
other names/site number

2. Location  
street & number 85 Touro Street  not for publication  
city, town Newport  vicinity  
state Rhode Island code 44 county Newport code 005 zip code 02840

3. Classification  
Ownership of Property  private  public-local  public-State  public-Federal  
Category of Property  building(s)  district  site  structure  object  
Number of Resources within Property  
Contributing 1 Noncontributing  
buildings  
sites  
structures  
objects  
Total

Name of related multiple property listing: \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.  
Signature of certifying official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.  
Signature of commenting or other official *Edmund C. ...* Date *Dec 15, 1988*  
State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:  
 entered in the National Register.  See continuation sheet.  
 determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet.  
 determined not eligible for the National Register.  
 removed from the National Register.  
 other, (explain): *Documentation accepted*  
*Beth L. Savage* for Signature of the Keeper *2-2-89* Date of Action

---

**6. Function or Use**

---

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Religion/Religious StructuresGovernment/capitolGovernment/courthouse

---

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Religion/Religious Structure

---

---

---

---

**7. Description**

---

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Colonial/Georgian

---

---

---

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Brickwalls Brick

---

roof Stone/slateother 

---

---

---

**Describe present and historic physical appearance.**

Touro Synagogue National Historic Site, the oldest standing Jewish synagogue in the United States, is a small .23-acre site at #85 Touro Street in Newport, Rhode Island. The synagogue was dedicated on December 2, 1763, by the Rabbi Isaac Touro, the first minister of the congregation of Newport Sephardim (Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin).

The Masonic, Georgian style structure, designed by the preeminent eighteenth-century architect Peter Harrison, was built on an acute angle to the street so that those facing the synagogue's Holy Ark would face eastward toward Jerusalem. Although plain, the exterior boasts a hipped slate roof, a modillion cornice, a center pedimented portico with Ionic columns, and arched Palladian windows. The exterior brick walls are painted yellow ochre; the doors and window frames are painted brown. Attached to the main building and built at the same time is a two-story ell, designed primarily as a religious school for the children of the congregation. A granite-post and cast-iron fence, erected in 1842, encloses the structure.(1)

The interior consists of 12 Ionic columns supporting the women's gallery, above which rise 12 Corinthian columns supporting a domed ceiling. Suspended from the ceiling are five large brass candelabra dating from 1760 to 1770. The center one is a 12-branched candelabra with four figureheads. A wainscotted seat runs along the sides of the wall below and in the gallery, with a raised section at the center of the north wall for the president and vice president of the congregation. A greyish orchid carpet covers the original wide board floor. The walls are painted with off-white limewash and all interior woodwork is grey. The columns, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, are made of solid log.

The Holy Ark, an imposing pedimented fontispiece, contains the scrolls of the Torah mounted on wooden rollers. The rimonim-silver belltops which adorn the rollers, are the work of the famous pre-revolutionary silversmith, Myer Myers. Above the Holy Ark is a colorful painting of the Ten Commandments by Benjamin Howland, dated 1828, delicately framed by the

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Architecture  
Religion

Period of Significance

1763-1883

Significant Dates

1763

Cultural Affiliation

Significant Person

Architect/Builder

Peter Harrison

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Touro Synagogue was designated a National Historical Historic Site on March 5, 1946. It is significant in that it is the oldest standing synagogue in the United States, a splendid example of the architectural genius of colonial architect Peter Harrison, a symbol of religious liberty, and a site that is closely tied to the history of Newport and its Jewish community. It is eligible for listing in the National Register under criteria "A" and "C."

The synagogue is considered one of the most significant works of Peter Harrison whose designs were exceptional in Colonial America for their purity of detail and monumental qualities. He also designed the Redwood Library in Newport (1748-50), King's Chapel, Boston (1749-54), the Brick Market, Newport (1761), and Christ Church, Cambridge (1761). Harrison was one of the premier architects of Colonial America. Many consider the Jewish synagogue of Newport, with its style in harmony with principles of religious liberty, to be his best work.(1)

Rhode Island's tradition of religious toleration is reflected in the history of Newport and in the growth of its Jewish community. Jews were attracted to Newport by religious freedom offered by Roger Williams, founder of the colony of Rhode Island. They were also lured by the commercial advantages Newport offered in colonial times. The earliest mention of Jews in Newport is 1658, when fifteen Jewish families are said to have arrived, but it was Jews who settled there between 1740 and 1760 who gave Newport the great impulse to commercial activity. Newport Jews were merchants, shippers, craftsmen, and producers who contributed to the making of that bustling city port. The earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1755 precipitated the arrival of many Jews in Newport, one of these being Isaac Touro who became the first rabbi of the Congregation Yeshuat Israel (Salvation of Israel).(2)

Members of the Congregation Yeshuat Israel were Sephardim, Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. They worshipped in private homes with Ashkenazim, Jews of Central and Eastern Europe following the Spanish-Portuguese ritual.

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Huhner, L. and Kohler, Max J. "Newport." In Jewish Encyclopedia. New York: KTAV Publishing, 1964.

Kimball, Fiske. "Harrison, Peter." In Dictionary of American Biography. IV. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960.

Lewis, Theodore Rabbi Dr. "History of Touro Synagogue." Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society 48 (Summer 1975), pp. 281-320.

Schwartz, Esther I. "Restoration of the Touro Synagogue." Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes III (October 1959), pp. 23-26.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Touro Synagogue Restored 1827-29." Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians XVII (Summer 1958), pp. 106-124.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # HABS RI-278
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

- Primary location of additional data:
- State historic preservation office
  - Other State agency
  - Federal agency
  - Local government
  - University
  - Other
- Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property .23

UTM References

A 

1	9
---	---

3	0	6	9	4	0
---	---	---	---	---	---

4	5	9	5	5	1	0
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

  
 Zone Easting Northing

C 

--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

B 

--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

  
 Zone Easting Northing

D 

--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city lot that has historically been associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Rebekah Tosado/Dwight T. Pitcaithley  
 organization National Park Service date November 1988  
 street & number 15 State Street telephone (617) 565-8840  
 city or town Boston, MA 02109-3572 state MA zip code 02109-3572

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Touro Synagogue National Historic Site

Section number 7 Page 1

---

bellflower pendants of the ark. The Ner Tamid (eternal light) which dates from 1765, shines in a silver vessel before the ark. Six elaborate brass candlestands are also original to the synagogue. The bema, from which the Scripture is read, was described by Ezra Stiles, a Congregational Minister in Newport and future president of Yale University who was present at the dedication service in 1763: "The Pulpit for Reading the Law is a raised Pew with an extended front table; this placed about the center of the Synagogue or nearer the West End, being a Square balustrading Comporting with the Length of the indented Chancel before the end of the Foot of the Ark."(2)

Touro Synagogue has been refurbished several times in its history. One study which described an 1827-29 restoration program suggests that the present ark was erected during that period. In addition, the structure underwent considerable work on both the exterior and interior. Yet detailed bills suggest "no evidence that the replacements differed to any great extent from the original design."(3) Other documents reveal that a slate roof replaced the old slate roof and general repairs to the structure may have been completed in 1857-58. In 1954 the Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue, Inc. formed a restoration committee. Interior work undertaken by this group included encasing the solid log columns with canvas and covering the plaster sidewalls with canvas to prevent cracking. The interior was painted, new carpet installed, and the candelabra restored. In 1974 the fence was reconstructed.(4)

Located in the school building ell of the synagogue is the George Washington Museum Room. Dedicated in 1972, it contains an exhibition of items relating to the early Jewish settlers in Newport. Included among the items on display is an ornate silver-encased Hebrew Bible used by one of the original members of Touro Synagogue.

1. Esther I. Schwartz, "Restoration of the Touro Synagogue," Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes, III (October 1959), p. 111.

2. Ezra Stiles, "Silkworms" as quoted in Schwartz, p. 117.

3. Esther I. Schwartz, "Touro Synagogue Restored 1827-29," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, XVII (Summer 1959), p. 25.

4. James D. Skelton, "Touro Synagogue--An Investigation of Finishes," (Typescript, National Park Service, May 17, 1976); Rabbi Dr. Theodore Lewis, "History of Touro Synagogue," Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society, 48 (Summer 1975), p. 307.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Touro Synagogue National Historic Site

Section number 8 Page 1

---

By 1759, an enlarged congregation was in need of a permanent place of worship. They appealed for funds to their coreligionists in other colonies, in South America, and in England. New York responded with aid for the congregation and ground was broken for a synagogue in the same year. It was completed four years later and dedicated on December 2, 1763, with a service conducted by Rabbi Touro.

Upon the British occupation of Newport, beginning December 8, 1776, the synagogue was immediately closed and Rabbi Touro left for Kingston, Jamaica, with his family where he died on December 8, 1782. Commerce declined in Newport, and many other members of the congregation left the city. The evacuation of the British from Newport on October 25, 1779, led to a partial revival of town life. It was during the post-revolutionary period that the synagogue served various public functions - as a State House for the General Assembly of Rhode Island from 1781 to 1784, a meeting place for the Town Council in 1781, and the site of sessions of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island.(3)

Although remnants of the population returned, the end of the war did not revive the Jewish community in Newport, nor did the city return to its commercial prosperity. It was at this low point in the history of Newport that the city was honored by a visit from President George Washington in August of 1790. After receiving a letter of address from Moses Seixas, the synagogue's warden, Washington responded with a declaration of religious liberty. His letter was inspired by the spirit of religious toleration established by Roger Williams through Rhode Island's Code of Laws of 1647.

In 1791, the synagogue was closed again and remained closed for 60 years. During this time, title of the building passed into the hands of the Congregation Shearith Israel of New York City. The building stood empty and neglected, but not forgotten. Abraham Touro, son of Isaac Touro, left a \$10,000 fund for the care and preservation of the synagogue upon his death in 1822. Thanks to this timely and unusual bequest for the preservation of an abandoned building, the structure underwent considerable repairs inside and out in the years 1827-29.(4) Rabbi Touro's second son, Judah, who died in 1854, left a bequest for the establishment of a Ministerial Fund at Touro Synagogue.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Touro Synagogue

Section number   8   Page   2  

---

The synagogue permanently reopened in 1883, at which time Rabbi Abraham P. Mendes became head of the congregation on the appointment of the New York congregation. In 1893, a new congregation was organized in Newport, taking the old name of Yeshuat Israel and following the traditional Spanish-Portuguese ritual. It was incorporated by the State of Rhode Island in 1894, with the trustees of Shearith Israel acting as its trustees. The property is still owned by the Congregation of Shearith Israel of New York City who, together with the Secretary of the Interior, the Congregation Yeshuat Israel of Newport, and the Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue, National Historic Shrine, Inc., continue to preserve the balance, fabric, and genius loci of the site.

1. Fiske Kimball, "Peter Harrison," in Dictionary of American Biography, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), IV, p. 347.

2. L. Huhner and Max J. Kohler, "Newport," in Jewish Encyclopedia (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1964), pp. 294-295.

3. Esther I. Schwartz, "Restoration of the Touro Synagogue," Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes, III (October 1959), p. 122.

4. Ibid., p. 107.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Touro Synagogue National Historic Site

Section number   10   Page   1  

---

All that certain tract of land with the buildings thereon situate, lying and being in the City of Newport, in the State of Rhode Island, whereon the Jewish Synagogue now stands, bounded and described as follows: Southerly on Touro Street, ninety-two & forty-six one hundredths feet; Easterly on land of the Newport Historical Society One hundred and nine and eight tenths feet; Northerly on Barney Street, ninety and sixty-five one hundredths feet; and Westerly on land of George P. Lawton, by said dimensions more or less



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

SUPPLEMENTARY RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 66000927

Date Documentation  
Accepted: 02/02/89

Touro Synagogue National  
Historic Site  
Property Name

Newport  
County

RI  
State

N/A  
Multiple Name

-----  
This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

*Beth J. Savage*  
Signature of the Keeper

2-2-89  
Date of Action

=====  
Amended Items in Nomination:

Criteria considerations:

Criteria exception A is applicable for the property's religious use and ownership.

This information was confirmed with Dwight Pitcaithley, North Atlantic Regional Office, NPS, by telephone.

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

---

Touro Synagogue National Historic Site

Newport Co., RHODE ISLAND

CONFIRMATION

Approved

*B. H. Savage*  
*2/2/89*