

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

ST. THOMAS SYNAGOGUE

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: ST. THOMAS SYNAGOGUE

Other Name/Site Number: BERACHA VESHALOM VEGEMILUTH HASADIM (BLESSING AND PEACE AND ACTS OF PIETY); THE SYNAGOGUE

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: Crystal Gade #16AB, Queens Quarters

Not for publication: N/A

City/Town: Charlotte Amalie

Vicinity: N/A

State: U.S. Virgin Islands

County: St. Thomas

Code: 030

Zip Code: 00804

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X
Public-local:
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

Category of Property

Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing
2

Noncontributing
buildings
sites
1 structures
objects
1 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 2

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I, hereby certify that this property is:

- \_\_\_ Entered in the National Register
- \_\_\_ Determined eligible for the National Register
- \_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the National Register
- \_\_\_ Removed from the National Register
- \_\_\_ Other (explain):

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_

Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Religious

Sub: Religious facility

Current: Religious

Sub: Religious facility

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Mid-19th century:  
Greek Revival/Gothic Revival

**MATERIALS:**

Foundation: Stone

Walls: Stone, Brick around window and door openings

Roof: Metal

Other:

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

*Beracha Veshalom Vegemiluth Hasadim* (Blessing and Peace and Acts of Piety) Synagogue (see Photo 1), referred to as the St. Thomas Synagogue, is located at Crystal Gade #16AB, on the southeastern slope of Denmark Hill in one of the older residential areas of Charlotte Amalie, to the north of the town's main business district. The Synagogue was built in 1833 on the same site as the first Synagogue erected in 1792. This is the fourth Synagogue to occupy this site. The first and third synagogues along with the surrounding residential area of Denmark Hill were razed by fires that devastated the area in 1804 and 1831. The second synagogue (1812-23) was torn down and expanded (Svensson 1965:20-23). A small brick and rubble masonry office building sits on the southwest corner of the lot in front of the Synagogue (see Photos 1 and 2). A wrought iron gate and fence extend from the office across the south side of the lot (see Photo 1). The Synagogue and Office Building were listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 as contributing resources in the Charlotte Amalie Historic District.

**St. Thomas Synagogue**

A series of steps along the east side of the office lead up from the street to a wrought iron gate and fence that extends from the office across the south side of the lot. The gate, surmounted by a wrought iron Star of David, gives access to a paved terrace forecourt fronting the St. Thomas Synagogue and its entrance under a roofed porch, raised seven steps above the terrace level and paved in alternating black and white marble tiles.

The St. Thomas Synagogue (see Photos 1, 3-4) is a rectangular one-story rubble masonry building, 41 feet and three bays wide, by 46 feet and four bays deep. It almost covers the full width of the property (east-west measurement) with the west wall only 10 inches from the retaining wall of the neighboring property, and the east wall standing within a few inches of the retaining wall towards the lower elevation of the property to the east. The colonnaded temple front of the building depicts a Greek Revival influence and the Gothic shaped windows and doors indicate a Gothic Revival influence.

The walls of the Synagogue are constructed of rubble masonry using a mortar of lime, sand, and molasses. The framing of door and window openings is red brick and on the exterior it is faced with calcified sandstone laid in an ashlar pattern (see photo 3). The framing of doors and window openings on the interior are of red and yellow brick (see photo 5). All door and window openings are Gothic arches.

The hipped roof is constructed of wood and covered by corrugated metal roofing over wood sheathing. The roof gutters are carried behind a parapet wall on the front and sides of the building. A small shuttered dormer on the west slope of the roof provides access and outside ventilation to the attic space.

The roof of the porch fronting the entrance to the Synagogue is supported by two pairs of red brick columns that are duplicated by similar pairs of semi-detached red brick columns flanking the entrance centered in the south wall. The columns are Tuscan in style as is the plastered and white painted entablature they carry. This in turn provides the facing of the porch roof construction. The main entrance, like all door and window openings of the Synagogue, is headed by a Gothic arch.

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Two window openings are on the north and south walls, while the west and east walls, have four window openings. All window and door openings on the interior are splayed at the top from equilateral pointed arches on the outer surface of the wall to a wide segmented arch on the interior wall surface. All of the window openings have exterior wood shutters, and fixed interior louvered wooden shutters in the tympanum with adjustable louvered shutters below it with either two or four folding panels. There are projecting surrounds around the exterior window openings and doors. The two doors of the Synagogue are located on the north and south sides of the building between the window openings. The brick exterior surrounds for the windows have been exposed by removing the plaster covering in 1973-74.

The interior window louvered shutters and doors are crafted in pine. The shutters have been stained to match the interior mahogany woodwork, while the doors are painted white.

The exterior surrounds for the doors still retain their plaster covering. The corners of the building have wide projecting bands that extend from an articulated and molded base to the cornice and above to the crown molding of the parapet. All molding and profiles of the architectural features of the exterior are patterned on the Tuscan order.

The plastered exterior parapet walls, main cornice, corner bands and bases, and surrounds of the doorways are painted white. The plaster has been removed from the brick columns and window surrounds on the front of the Synagogue (see Photos 3 and 4), and the stone facing of the exterior has been painted a subdued ocher. The metal roof of the Synagogue has been painted an iron oxide red.

Behind the Synagogue, on the north side of the property was a former open courtyard, which in 1984 was enclosed with a two story wooden addition. The second floor provides space for a library and office for the rabbi, and the ground floor is an area for exhibits and overflow area for the congregation.

The interior of the Synagogue (see Photo 5) has an west-east orientation in accordance with ritual practices, with the Ark, currently holding six Torahs, centered against the east wall and the *Bimah* (or pulpit) against the west wall facing the Ark. To emphasize the east-west orientation of the interior space, the builders and designers of the Synagogue created a square area in the center defined by four Ionic columns resting on tall pedestals. About halfway up the Ionic columns are two-armed antique brass chandeliers, modernized for electric lights.

The 9-foot plus space between the column pedestals delineating the central area of the Synagogue and the north and south walls have broad masonry platforms two steps above and leading to the center floor area. The platforms on the south and north sides of the interior of the Synagogue support mahogany pews, or *bancas*, for the congregation.

Traditionally men sat in the first four rows of mahogany pews on the north and south sides of the central area of the Synagogue. Above the central area, on the broad masonry platforms, which run the entire west-east length of the Synagogue, are additional rows of mahogany pews for women and children. The men and women seating areas are separated by 3-foot tall wooden partitions, or *m'chitzat* (see Photo 6).

The interior columns are said to represent the four mothers of Israel: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel,

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and Leah. The columns support a full entablature with an architrave, an elaborate frieze and a widely projecting cornice. This in turn supports a quadripartite vault with a rope molding in the arises of the vault and a boss design of the Star of David, 31 feet above the floor of the Synagogue. The vault interior is plastered and painted white.

The vault is a plaster shell over wood lath attached to rafters shaped to the curvature of the vault. The rafters are braced to the roof structure, and at their base are joined to the upper cord of the box girder between the interior columns that also supports the attic floor. A seven-inch high continuous open space between the floor and the shell of the vault is carried around the periphery at its base interrupted only by the widely spaced rafters. From the floor level of the interior this device is hidden from view by the wide projection of the cornice. In the daytime, the heated air of the attic escapes through the dormer and creates an updraft in the Synagogue and ventilation of the roof structure.

During evening services, the rise in temperature of the Synagogue creates a similar updraft and effects a cooling of the interior. Of equal importance is the equalizing of air pressure within the building during hurricane conditions that this design allows. The Synagogue has been through numerous violent hurricanes since its erection without any serious damage to its fabric.

Suspended from the center of the vault is an eighteen-armed brass chandelier of French design. Each of the arms supports a candle stand and Baccarat crystal hurricane shade (see Photo 5). The ceiling, between the outer walls of the Synagogue and the central area of the vault, is flat and plastered and painted white. This ceiling is slightly more than 18 feet above the floor. Six six-armed brass chandeliers with glass hurricane shades for candles are suspended from this ceiling over the central floor area. These chandeliers have been electrified. Four ceiling fans also are suspended from the ceiling.

The *Heikhal*, or area containing the Ark, is raised two steps above the floor of the central area on the east side of the interior of the Synagogue. On either side of the *Heikhal* are benches originally intended to seat the Synagogue's leaders (*parnasim*). Two pedestalled Tuscan columns, built into the central area of the south wall, support a scrolled broken pediment, all plastered and painted white. The columns flank the paneled mahogany doors of the Ark, containing six Torah scrolls. The Ark is also built into the wall of the Synagogue. Above the Ark are two blue tablets with the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) in gilded Hebrew letters resting on the lower cord of the pediment. The tablets are embraced by the scrolls of the upper cord of the broken pediment and surmounted by a smaller tablet depicting the closed crown. Suspended from the ceiling in front of the Ark is the Lamp of Perpetual Light, called the *Ner Tamid* (see Photo 7).

On the west side of the interior is the *Bimah*, from which the service is conducted. The *Bimah* area is on three stepped platforms above the central area. Along the west wall behind the reader's lectern on the highest platform is a mahogany wooden bench for the service's participants. In front of the bench is a mahogany lectern facing the Ark on the east wall. Access to the *Bimah* is on the north and south sides by paneled wooden rails with brass finials on the rear newels and tall brass candlesticks on the front newels. Two steps below the *Bimah* area is a smaller octagonal enclosure of the wooden reader's desk (see Photo 8).

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The floor of the Synagogue is paved with ceramic tile. In accordance with Sephardic Jewish tradition, the central floor area of the congregation is covered with about an inch of sand.

**The Synagogue Office and Fence**

The St. Thomas Synagogue is situated on an irregularly shaped lot of approximately one-quarter acre on the north side of Crystal Gade, along with the Office of the Synagogue. The single story brick and rubble masonry Synagogue Office is built against the street (Crystal Gade) and the west borderline of the lot (see Photo 2). The office is trapezoid in plan with a width of 15 feet 2 inches and its parallel west and east walls measuring 24 feet 9 inches and 15 feet 10 inches, respectively.

The Synagogue Office is a single story freestanding brick and rubble masonry building located in the southwest corner of the property. It has two windows in the south wall facing the street, and two windows in the east wall. A door in the north wall facing St. Thomas Synagogue's terraced forecourt provides the sole access to the office. All four windows and door are headed by Gothic arches. They all have exterior double board shutters and the windows, in addition, have interior louvered wooden shutters.

The office has a projecting base with vertical banding of corners and surrounds of masonry openings in a yellow Danish brick generally referred to as Flensburg stone. A narrow cornice is crowned by a parapet wall. A nearly flat roof of three layers of brick set in mortar and supported by a web of wooden beams and purlins is hidden by the parapet wall. Except for the cornice and parapet wall that have retained their original plaster finish and are painted white, the plaster inside and out was removed in 1973-1974 to expose the stone and brickwork of the rubble masonry construction. The office building did not appear on the 1836 building survey of Charlotte Amalie (Woods 1992:64) but it does appear on a working drawing of the Synagogue that has the date of 1833. It is counted as a contributing building.

A wrought iron fence runs from the east wall of the Synagogue Office to the southeast corner of the property. The entrance is crowned with a Star of David (see Photo 1 and 3). The construction date of the iron fence has not been documented. It probably postdates the construction of the present St. Thomas Synagogue (1833), as they do not appear on the 1836 building survey of Charlotte Amalie (Woods 1992:64). In all probability it predates the economic decline of St. Thomas during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (pre-1875) (Taylor 1888:52). The fence was not counted in the 1976 National Register nomination but is counted as noncontributing because it post-dates the period of significance in this NHL nomination.

**Integrity**

Since their construction in the nineteenth century, the St. Thomas Synagogue, Synagogue Office, and iron fence have been well maintained by the congregation. Between 1973 and 1974, the gutters and roof of the Synagogue were repaired, and most of the chandeliers which once used candles for illumination were electrified. Deteriorated wooden shutters and doors were repaired or replaced in kind. All of the interior wood features, such as the Ark, *Bimah*, and pews of mahogany are original to the 1833 construction of the Synagogue.

The only departure from the original Synagogue integrity was the removal of the white painted plaster from interior walls of the Synagogue, the exterior porch columns, and the Office

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building. Plans are being considered for the replacement of the plaster to prevent damage from water infiltration. The enclosure of the rear courtyard with a two story addition has not diminished the integrity of the Synagogue as it is not visible to the public due to the confines of the building on a small lot surrounded by retaining walls and neighboring buildings. The general character of the building is still apparent, exterior as well as interior, and it remains one of the most impressive, inspiring, and notably gratifying religious structures in the West Indies.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

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

Nationally: X Statewide: \_\_\_ Locally: \_\_\_

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A X B\_ C\_ D\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):

A X B\_ C\_ D\_ E\_ F\_ G\_

NHL Criteria:

1

NHL Criteria Exclusion:

1

NHL Theme(s):

- I. Peopling Places
  - 4. Community and Neighborhood
- II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements
  - 3. Religious Movements

Areas of Significance:

Religion

Period(s) of Significance:

1833-ca. 1850

Significant Dates:

1833

Significant Person(s):

N/A

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architect/Builder:

Unknown

NHL Comparative Categories:

- XXX. American Ways of Life
  - E. Ethnic Communities

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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.****Summary Statement of Significance**

The Synagogue of St. Thomas, called *Beracha Veshalom Vegemiluth Hasadim* (Blessing and Peace and Acts of Piety), built in 1833, is the second-oldest synagogue and longest in continuous use in the United States. The congregation, originally Spanish and Portuguese Sephardic Jews, came to the Caribbean Basin to finance trade between Europe and the New World. The St. Thomas congregation, founded in 1796, reached its zenith by the mid-nineteenth century. The congregation declined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the fortunes of the Danish Virgin Islands, but today has the largest congregation in its history. The St. Thomas Synagogue is surpassed in age only by Touro Synagogue (1763), in Newport, Rhode Island, which was designated a National Historic Site on March 5, 1946, and is an affiliated unit of the National Park Service. Touro Synagogue, however, was only occasionally used for worship between the 1820s and 1880s, making the St. Thomas Synagogue the oldest synagogue building in continuous use in the United States. The congregation of *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim* in Charleston, South Carolina was established in 1749 and erected its current house of worship in 1840. It was designated an NHL in 1980 in part in belief that the synagogue was the second oldest extant in the country and the oldest in continual use. The St. Thomas Synagogue predates *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim* Synagogue by seven years. The St. Thomas Synagogue meets Criteria Exclusion 1 as a religious property that derives its primary national significance from its historic importance.

**Historical Background**

The Sephardic Jewish Synagogue and Congregation of St. Thomas may trace its roots through some two thousand years of the Hebrew Diaspora, starting with the destruction of the Jewish nation and the Great Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in the first century A.D. Some of these displaced Hebrew peoples ended up in the Iberian peninsula, where over some 1500 years under Roman, Visigothic, Muslim, and Christian rulers they worshiped in their synagogues, attended to their businesses, and raised their families according to religious tenets that over time evolved and came to identify them as Sephardic (Spanish and Portuguese) Jewish peoples (Kedourie 1992:8).

During their time in Iberia, the Sephardic peoples were on occasion subjected to religious persecution, special taxation, and restrictions on where they could live and what occupations they could hold. However, the elite among the Sephardic peoples consisting of doctors, bureaucrats, financiers, and religious leaders often formed symbiotic relations with their non-Jewish rulers that proved of mutual benefit to both groups.

In the latter part of the fourteenth century, however, the same religious fervor that the Castilian Catholic kings used in their successful war of liberation, or *Reconquista*, of the Iberian peninsula from the Muslims also became directed at the Jews. In the past, Sephardic communities in Spanish towns were under the protection of Spanish kings who derived both financial and administrative benefit from their Jewish subjects. However, when a weak young king, Henry III ascended the throne in 1390, a series of pogroms occurred in Seville, Barcelona, Toledo, Burgos, and Valladolid the next year led by a fanatical administrator for the archdiocese of Seville, Ferrant Martines. The general intent of the pogroms was to forcibly convert the Jews to Christianity, which affected tens of thousands of Jews living in the

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Christian controlled areas of Spain. Records indicate most Jews left the large urban centers of Spain for rural towns or elected to become "New Christians", or *conversos* (MacKay 1992:49).

The union by marriage of the two most powerful Christian rulers on the Iberian peninsula, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, in 1469, meant the full might of the Spanish military was now united to complete the *Reconquista* of Spain. An important aspect of the *Reconquista* was that it was not just a war of conquest but a Christian crusade against non-Catholics, which meant it became a war against the faiths of Islam and Judaism. To pursue the religious front of this war, the Spanish Inquisition was founded by papal bull in 1478 at the request of Ferdinand and Isabella, with the Inquisition beginning its activities in 1480 under Tomas Torquemada as the first Inquisitor-General (Kamen 1992:74-75).

The official policy of the rulers of Spain was that the Jews should willingly accept conversion to Christianity. It was the Spanish Inquisition's job to see that *conversos* did not backslide into their original faith. In fact, during the last two decades of the fifteenth century these *conversos* were the main target of the Inquisition (Kamen 1992:76). During this time, Judaism quite literally moved underground as basements of houses became makeshift synagogues. According to Sephardic tradition, synagogues, like the St. Thomas Synagogue, have their floors covered with clean sand to commemorate this period of time when Jews covered their basement floors with sand to muffle the sounds of congregations practicing their faith (Rabbi B. Boxman, personal communication, 1995).

On March 31, 1492, three months after the conquest of Granada, ending the *Reconquista* of Spain, the king and queen of a united Spain issued a decree for the expulsion of all unconverted Jews from their realm. In their opinion, having unconverted Jews living in close proximity to *conversos* encouraged the latter to continue to follow their original faith (Kamen 1992:76). The Jews were given three months to settle their affairs and depart or become New Christians. It has been estimated that possibly half of Spain's Jews "converted" at this time, with the other half leaving Spain for nearby Portugal, while smaller numbers took boats to southern France, Italy, and areas of the Ottoman Empire in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean where they sought refuge among established Jewish communities (Kamen 1992:84).

Later, due to a marriage of state between Spain and Portugal in 1496, a Jewish expulsion decree (1497) was generated for the latter country and many of the recently resettled Jews from Spain were again on the move, this time with their Portugese Sephardic Jewish cousins (Kamen 1992:83). In addition, pressure by the Inquisition on *conversos* who remained in Spain, but were practicing Judaism in secret, caused tens of thousands to flee Spain in the decade after the 1492 expulsion decree (Kamen 1992:85).

Under the Spanish expulsion decree, the prohibition on Judaism was rigorously enforced in Castile, Aragon, the Balearic Islands, Sicily, and Sardinia, but appears to have been less so in Spanish overseas territories such as Oran, in North Africa, Naples, Milan, the Spanish Netherlands, and the New World which provided refuge for the displaced *conversos* (Kamen 1992:84, 90). The Portugese permitted *conversos* to emigrate to their colonies in India, Brazil, and the Atlantic Islands (Beinart 1992:119).

In a remarkable sense of historical irony, the very persecution and forced emigration inflicted

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on the Sephardic Spanish and Portugese Jews and *conversos*, became in the long run their source of strength that would help to keep their faith alive and cause their religion to prosper and spread throughout the world. Although there had been a Sephardic elite that served as counselors and financial administrators to Christian and Moslem rulers, the majority of the Jewish people made their living as small traders, farmers, shopkeepers, and money lenders. These were the trades and crafts most needed as European countries entered the Age of Exploration and established colonies in parts of the globe that were vaguely or completely unknown to them at the time of the 1492 expulsion.

Throughout the sixteenth century Sephardic Jews in the Spanish Netherlands financed trade in northern European goods, such as iron, wood, grain, and cloth, for southern European and colonial goods, such as wool, rock salt, sugar, spices, tobacco, coffee, and cocoa beans. This trade was founded on trading connections with *conversos*, often family members, still residing in Spain and Portugal and the overseas possessions in the New World, Africa, and the Far East. In addition, some of these goods were also being carried in ships captained by *conversos* (Beinart 1992:120). According to John Lynch, in *Spain After the Expulsion*, Sephardic Jews played significant roles in the financing of Spanish kings, and the development of trade with the Indies,

For the New Christian [or *converso*] elite . . . the characteristic vocation was finance. Spanish imperial finance had long depended on Italian bankers, who had the capacity to handle the transfer of funds from Spain to the Low Countries [Spanish Netherlands]. Anxious to escape the hard settlements imposed by the Genoese . . . Philip II's government was ready to consider an alternative set of bankers, even if they were Jews and were accumulating their capital on the margin of legality. The union of the [Spanish and Portugese] crowns in 1580 and the surge in transatlantic traffic in the late sixteenth century opened up commercial opportunities that the Portuguese New Christians were quick to exploit. Some made vast fortunes trading in Asian products, investing in the Brazilian sugar industry, and supplying slaves to both Brazil and Spanish America; others reexported commodities from northern Europe to America [1992:147].

By 1550, transoceanic commerce and investment were the basis for the economic and social existence of *conversos* in Portugal and Spain. In order to support international trade with the New World, Africa, and Asia, outlying colonies of trading partners of *conversos* were established in northern European towns, particularly Antwerp, which "was the general storehouse and emporium for all Spanish and Portuguese colonial commodities in northern Europe" (Israel 1992:191).

By the 1570s, however, the Sephardic traders of Antwerp were leaving for Amsterdam to avoid the religious warfare between the Catholic Spanish crown and the Dutch Lutheran rebels, in the southern portion of the Spanish Netherlands. However, an additional incentive for Jewish emigration was the issuance of the Union of Utrecht (1579), the founding constitutional document of the Dutch republic, which guaranteed that no one would be investigated or prosecuted on the basis of their religion (Israel 1992:192).

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The Sephardic Jews were allowed by the Dutch government to build their first synagogue in 1597, and in 1657 all resident Jews were recognized as Dutch nationals. Although they did not receive full citizenship rights until 1796 (Boxer 1990:144-145). As a result of this movement of Sephardic Jewish merchants and traders to Amsterdam, by the 1590s it had become "northern Europe's foremost emporium for sugar, spices, and all other products from the Iberian colonial empires" (Israel 1992:194).

Under the liberal atmosphere of Holland the Sephardic Jews could openly worship in their own synagogues for the first time since their expulsion from Spain in 1492. The Jewish community in Holland served as a magnet for Sephardic Jews from Muslim countries and Venice, as well as a continuing emigration from Iberia (Israel 1992:197). By the 1620s, there were over 1000 Jews in Amsterdam in three congregations. Not only did this community engage in trade it also was a major European center of Jewish religious training and publishing of books in Hebrew (Israel 1992:200).

As the Sephardic Jews managed most of the trade in New World products that passed through Holland via the Iberian ports, it was natural that when the Dutch developed their own overseas empire that Jews would play an important role (Bloom 1937:128). In particular, when the Dutch seized the northern coast of Brazil in the 1630s, "a large number of Dutch Sephardim emigrated to Brazil, mainly to Recife, and captured a large share in the sugar export business" under the auspices of the Dutch West India Company (Israel 1992:203).

According to Jonathan Israel, in his article "The Sephardim in the Netherlands", the Brazilian experience was significant in getting large numbers of Sephardic Jews into the New World,

. . . the West India Company granted Jewish emigrants who settled in Brazil much greater economic as well as religious and personal freedom than yet existed for Jews in the Dutch republic itself, the rush to Brazil assumed what for Dutch Sephardi Jewry were enormous proportions. By 1644 there were 1450 Sephardim living as Jews in Netherlands Brazil, a figure not much less than the total then living in Holland itself, and although a proportion of those in Brazil were former New Christians who had reverted to normative Judaism in Brazil, most had emigrated from, or at least via, the Netherlands [1992:203].

Major innovations in the processing of sugar were introduced by the Dutch and the Sephardic Jews between 1638 and 1645, which saw Brazil export an average of 23,300 tons of sugar per year (Watts 1986:182).

Under the Dutch occupancy of Pernambuco, between 1636 and 1645, Sephardic Jews had been sent out from Europe [to Brazil] generally to enhance trading facilities and to rationalise the importation of slave labour for sugar estates. They also introduced some significant milling innovations, which raised both the quality and efficiency of cane production . . . Although the origins of the three-roller mill are still unclear, there seems to be little doubt that it was first employed widely within the Pernambuco region at this time [Watts 1986:179].

Unfortunately for the Dutch, a Portuguese military expedition retook the Pernambuco region,

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in 1645, once again forcing a relocation of Jews with expertise in sugar cultivation and capital, this time to English Barbados. The English, who had settled Barbados in the 1630s, had previously developed good relations with the Dutch who were their main supplier of enslaved Africans, and would now provide capital for investment in establishing sugar plantations (Mintz 1985:53; Bloom 1937:144).

With Sephardic Jewish financing from Holland, Portugal had been supplying nearly all of Europe with sugar. However, within a generation England was able to drive Portugal out of the northern European trade in sugar, from its own plantations on Barbados, thanks to Jewish emigres from Brazil (Mintz 1985:39). The English on Barbados profited greatly from the Sephardic Jewish experience with sugar plantations in Brazil's Pernambuco province. By 1645,

. . . techniques of cane production and processing could be gained as well from a group of Sephardic Jews, formerly residents in Pernambuco and skilled in sugar refining, who trickled into Barbados following their expulsion on religious grounds from Brazil, as Portuguese-Catholic control over that territory was regained . . . By 1650, the sale of sugar cane products [from Barbados] had raised the value of exports from the island to over £3 million [Watts 1986:183].

By the 1650s there were Dutch Sephardic communities on Curacao, in Surinam, and Jamaica, in addition to Barbados (Israel 1992:205). It is interesting to note that Danish Virgin Islands plantations in the Caribbean "had been financed almost entirely by Dutch [i.e., Sephardic Jewish] capital" in the eighteenth century in a repeat of what had occurred in Brazil and on Barbados (Watts 1986:247).

A Jewish presence on St. Thomas may be traced back to the last two decades of the seventeenth century, when the Danish first undertook the colonization of the island. The fourth Governor of the Danish Virgin Islands, Gabriel Milan (1684-86) was from a Jewish family with trading connections in Portugal, the Netherlands, and Hamburg. To curry the favor of the Danish crown, Milan accepted the Lutheran faith in 1682 in order to improve his prospects of being employed by the Danish state (Westergaard 1917:58-59). However, even before his appointment, a few Jewish families and individuals from other areas of the West Indies had moved to the Caribbean Danish colony on St. Thomas (Boxman 1983:22).

The Danish West India Company that settled St. Thomas in 1672 received its charter from King Christian V in March 1671. It spelled out the Company's rights and limitations, the extent of the home government's assistance in the colonization of St. Thomas, taxes, customs duties, and judiciary matters. The charter did not specifically mention the Lutheran Church, but since it was the state religion of the United Kingdom of Denmark-Norway and the Company was to employ its ministers, it is clear the intent was to make it the official religion of the colony. The Charter stated "the Company was established for the benefit of commerce and for the general welfare which thereon depends." It also stated that foreigners who entered the service of the Company "shall enjoy the same treatment that His Majesty's subjects enjoy" (Westergaard 1917:294).

During the early years of the Danish colony, the Caribbean environment led to a high mortality rate for Northern European emigrants, which produced a critical shortage of manpower

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(Westergaard 1917:30). To relieve this situation the Company's administrators welcomed settlers from other areas of the Caribbean, including the Portuguese colony of Brazil. To encourage immigrants who did not embrace the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran faith), the Company adopted the concept of freedom of conscience as a policy.

In 1685 this policy of religious tolerance was formalized in a trade treaty between the Danish West India Company and the Prussian Brandenburger Company which would control the slave trade between Guinea, Africa and St. Thomas. The trade treaty between Prussia and Denmark stipulated the terms of a lease of lands on St. Thomas to the Brandenburger African Company as well as the terms under which it would be allowed to do business on St. Thomas. It included the conditions that Calvinists and Lutherans should have full freedom to exercise their rites and practices, while Jews and Catholics were allowed to hold private services "provided they did not provoke a scandal" (Westergaard 1917:76).

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Danish colonial records contain references to Jewish merchants involved in trade between Europe, Guinea, and St. Thomas (Paiewonsky 1959:6-7). The records note the Jewish residents of St. Thomas as coming from Brazil, and being Portuguese, which identifies them as Sephardic Jews (Boyer 1987:11). The records do not mention the existence of a Jewish congregation and freedom of worship under the Danes was not legalized until the mid-eighteenth century. It would appear the Jews on St. Thomas, at this time, worshiped in their homes (Oldendorp 1777:156). The records that would have pertained to an early Jewish congregation were most likely lost in the early nineteenth-century fires that twice destroyed the Synagogue.

In June of 1734 the Danish West India Company's ship *Unity* arrived in St. Thomas with the news that Denmark's treaty with France for the purchase of St. Croix had been ratified. It brought the orders from Louis XV of France to his governor and lieutenant general of the French Windward Islands, the Marquis de Champigny, to transfer the ownership of St. Croix to the Danish West India Company with the appropriate formalities. The *Unity* arrived at St. Thomas on the 11th of June and on the 23rd of the same month Governor Gardelin sent a delegation to Martinique with Emanuel Vass, a Jewish merchant of St. Thomas, as the official representative for the Danish West India Company (Westergaard 1917:210). It was a position of trust and an appointment that would only have been made based on a prior relationship of mutual respect. Later, it was noted that Sephardic "Jews originating from Brazil, Portugal, and Spain" were among the first to establish sugar plantations on St. Croix (Boyer 1983:11).

Christian G.A. Oldendorp, in his history of the Moravian Missions in the Danish West Indies, published in 1777, and based on his observations made during his visit to the islands in 1767-68, notes that, "There is a considerable number of Jews particularly in St. Croix" (Oldendorp 1777:138). He also mentions, "The Jews have no regular synagogue, but rather observe their worship services in private residences" (Oldendorp 1777:156), apparently referring to Jewish residents on both St. Thomas and St. Croix.

The real growth of the Jewish population of the Danish West Indies occurred during the late eighteenth century as a result of the British attack on the Dutch West Indies island of St. Eustatius. During the American War of Independence, St. Eustatius was a major source of military supplies for the North American colonies. The flow of contraband to the Americans had been a long-standing source of friction between Holland and England. In late December

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1780, Great Britain declared war on Holland and ordered Admiral Sir George Rodney to attack St. Eustatius (Goslinga 1985:197). On February 3, 1781 he arrived in Oranjestad Harbor with an overwhelming force of 14 ships of the line, 3 frigates and some minor ships, as well as 3,000 soldiers. An officer was sent ashore to demand the surrender of the island within an hour (Boxman 1983:7-8).

The British invasion came as a complete surprise to the Dutch authorities and citizens of St. Eustatius since word of the English declaration of war had not reached the Caribbean. For the defense of the island, it had a garrison of 60 men and two Dutch men-of-war. There was a brief exchange of shots, but resistance was futile, and Commander Johannes deGraaff signed the act of surrender.

All together Rodney seized 150 ships, including 60 belonging to Americans, and captured more than 2,000 American merchants and sailors which he sent with their agents to England as prisoners of war. Rodney then turned his attention to the merchants of St. Eustatius. English and Danish merchants were extradited to their homelands. Toward the French the attitude was somewhat more lenient, perhaps because of the presence of a powerful French fleet in the Caribbean. They were shipped to Guadeloupe and Martinique. Worse was the fate of the Jews. All male Jews, one hundred of them, were robbed of all their personal possessions, some were beaten, while 30 more were deported to St. Kitts. The remainder were allowed to witness the public sale of their properties.

In May of 1781 Admiral Rodney left St. Eustatius in the hands of a British garrison of 670 men. Following his departure, many of the inhabitants fled the island, and a number of them sought refuge in the neutral Danish West Indies. The increase in numbers of Sephardic Jews in both St. Croix and St. Thomas resulted in the formation of a congregation in Christiansted in 1784 (Larsen 1950:96), and in 1796 the first Synagogue on St. Thomas with the appellation of "Blessing and Peace," was built (Knox 1922:161-163; Boxman 1983:5).

The synagogue started with a small congregation of nine families that seven years later (1803) had increased to 22 families. The first synagogue was destroyed in the fire of November 1804 that burned large sections of western and central Charlotte Amalie. By 1812, there was a second synagogue, on the same site, but by 1823 this building was too small to adequately serve the growing congregation. In 1823, it was taken down and replaced by a larger wooden synagogue, on the same site, named "Blessing and Peace and Loving Deeds" to accommodate a congregation of 64 families (Boxman 1983:5). On New Year's Eve 1831, a fire started in the Commandant Gade section of Queens Quarter, the central part of Charlotte Amalie. Before it burned itself out New Year's Day 1832, it had destroyed about 800 buildings, among them the wooden synagogue built in 1823 (Svensson 1965:23; Boxman 1983:9).

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of growing prosperity for St. Thomas. The excellence and size of its harbor and its location midway between North and South America and within cruising range of the new steam-powered ships from Europe made St. Thomas an ideal transshipment point. The island was not only prospering, it also was optimistically predicting further growth and development. In such an atmosphere solicitations for the means to rebuild the St. Thomas Synagogue were met with generous responses in funds and materials, not only from the members of the congregation, but also the non-Jews of St. Thomas, as well as from Jewish congregations from abroad (Boxman 1983:9-11). The present

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St. Thomas Synagogue (see Figure 1 and Photos 1-4), designed by an unknown French architect, was built in 1833, and has served the Jewish congregation ever since. The working drawings of the St. Thomas Synagogue are still extant (Boxman 1983:12).

The following account of consecration of the synagogue appeared in the *St. Thomas Tidende* newspaper of September 14, 1833,

We are happy to have in our power to congratulate our friends of the Hebrew religion on the early completion of the New Synagogue. About six o'clock on Thursday evening the congregation assembled in their temporary place of worship, and shortly thereafter proceeded to the New Synagogue in the usual ceremonial order.

At 7:00 [PM], His Excellency the Governor, and many respectable persons entered the building and immediately thereafter the Consecration Service commenced. The Lamp of Perpetual Light borne by the eldest member of the Congregation followed by six sacred Rolls of the Pentateuch carried by members, appeared at the entrance, which the elder Priest received. He lighted the Lamp, pronounced the Benediction, and the Lamp was then handed to a younger Priest, who placed it on the stand appropriate for it. During the performance of these offices, the Reader returned thanks for being permitted to witness this solemn and impressive ceremony - the choir, consisting of young ladies and gentlemen, sang the 24th verse of the 118th Psalm.

The Reader then accompanied by the Rulers received the sacred Rolls, the choir singing the 26, 27, 28, and 29th verses of the 118th Psalm, while the same were introduced by a circuitous route to the Reader's desk - after which, commenced the Prayer for Our Beloved Sovereign and the Royal Family, as also for their Excellencies, the Governor-General, the Governor and all the other Magistrates - the same was also implored for all the congregation present. The choristers then sang the 10th verse of the 146 and the 29th Psalm - during which the Rolls

of the Pentateuch were deposited in the Ark. The Reader then returned to his Desk, and the choir singing from the 21st to the 29th verse of the 118th Psalm.

An excellent discourse taken from the first of Kings, Chapter 8, verse 13, written expressly for the occasion by Mr. Isaac Lindo, was most emphatically delivered by that gentleman, which made the congregation deeply impressed with the most pathetic feelings of reverence and devotion. Offerings were afterwards made, in which the liberality of the assembly was apparent.

The service of the Consecration was terminated by the choir chanting a Hymn for the occasion. In concluding our account of this memorable ceremony, it is only to say, the whole of which was conducted in a manner worthy of a people who were the first worshippers of the "true and living GOD" [Gjessing 1966:100-103].

The first half of the nineteenth century was also a time of great change within the Jewish

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religion. Prior to this time, Gentiles imposed restrictions on where Jews could live and their livelihoods. These strictures served to reinforce Jewish orthodoxy by which their religion created a cohesive society able to maintain its traditions in the face of changes imposed by a sometimes hostile outside world. On March 24, 1814, Denmark became one of the first European nations to enact a royal ordinance for extending full citizenship rights to Jews (Boxman 1983:25).

By 1833, as the congregation of St. Thomas was celebrating the completion of its new synagogue, most European countries had enfranchised their Jewish populations with full citizenship and civil rights. These changes engendered a schism within Jewish communities between those who desired to maintain their Orthodox traditions and those who wished to reform Jewish ceremonies to accommodate their new citizenship status. The religious debates ultimately saw many synagogues split into Orthodox and Reform groups, which set up separate synagogues (S. Hordes, personal communication, 1995).

The Jewish congregation on St. Thomas was not isolated from these debates. Indeed, its members found themselves in the forefront of the Reform movement with the appointment, in the early 1840s, of Rabbi Carillon to their synagogue. Rabbi Carillon, who appears to have been an advocate of the Reform movement, instituted Confirmation ceremonies for 14 year old boys and girls of the congregation, which were intended to compliment the traditional coming of age ceremonies, or *Bar Mitzvah* and *Bat Mitzvah*, for 13 year old boys and girls, respectively.

This new Confirmation ceremony was similar to the Confirmation ceremonies of Gentile religions, and adopted by Reform synagogues with the conscious intent of drawing themselves closer to the countries that granted them full citizenship and to promote religious tolerance. As one anonymous writer of St. Thomas noted, in the case of Denmark and its colonies, the Confirmation ceremony was enforced by law.

Confirmation for boys and girls of 14 years was ordered by the king for the Jews, in the mother country (Denmark), since 1814, and has now been extended to our island. I anticipate the happiest results from this measure, as the preparatory form of Catechism etc., will prevent, in my opinion, conversion. A severe penalty is attached to those who neglect it, they are not permitted to become citizens, hold office, marry, control the property they may get by inheritance, follow any trade, nor are their oaths taken in court. [Plaut n.d.:583].

The first Confirmation ceremony at the St. Thomas Synagogue, held on October 14, 1843, was the first of its kind ever held in the New World (Plaut n.d.:583). As noted in an article, entitled "History of the Jews in America", written by Rabbi M.D. Sasso, and submitted to the *American Jewish Archives Journal* by Rabbi Gunther Plaut,

Confirmation. We learn from a private letter from St. Thomas that the first confirmation among American Israelites took place on the Sabbath *Hol ha-Moed Sukkoth* [Feast of Tabernacles] in the Synagogue under the charge of the Rev. [Rabbi] Mr. Carillon. The ceremony is represented as having been very

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imposing. The names of the confirmed are, Mrs. Daniel Wolff, Misses Miriam and Rebecca Wolff, Miss D[eborah Simha] Cortissos, Miss [Esther] De Meza, Alexander Wolff, and Jacob Benjamin [Plaut n.d.:583].

Rabbi Carillon would perform two other Confirmation ceremonies on February 24 and April 14, 1844, for ten other 14 year olds of the St. Thomas Synagogue congregation. And, the tradition he started would be continued by succeeding Rabbis (Plaut n.d.:584-585).

In all probability, the cosmopolitan nature of the St. Thomas Hebrew Congregation disposed them to a Reform type of Judaism. Religious tolerance on St. Thomas was extended by Danish Governor General Peter von Scholten and several of his administrators who were prominent contributors to the construction fund for the 1833 Synagogue (Boxman 1983:10-11). According to one 1852 source,

Jews, Gentiles and sects of various names are very amicable in St. Thomas. Great good feeling prevails. Thousands of dollars can be readily raised for any object of general charity [Boxman 1983:27].

However, it would appear that not all of the congregation were happy with the changes instituted by Rabbi Carillon. In 1844,

A segment of the Congregation led by Judah Sasso and Mashed Mara refused to attend Synagogue services. "Immediately after the return of the Sefer Torah to the Hechal," they charged, "Rabbi Carillon proceeded with the wrong prayers and the Musaph was completely omitted." J. Fidanque, Act.[ing] President Jacob Haim Osorio, J. Levy Maduro, Moses Piza, and Jeudah Piza formed a committee to investigate. They reported that the charges were well founded.

Ritual was rearranged and harmony was restored to the Congregation. Rabbi Carillon left St. Thomas shortly afterwards for Jamaica [Boxman 1983:27].

In the two decades following the building of the new synagogue, the membership of the Hebrew Congregation increased, with the census records of 1835 showing a population of 467 Jews living in St. Thomas. By 1851, however, the Jewish population had declined to 372 persons (Paiewonsky 1959:12). As the prosperity of St. Thomas began to taper off in the last half of the nineteenth century, so did the Hebrew Congregation. The year 1867 was a disastrous one for St. Thomas. In October a devastating hurricane hit the island, followed in November by a tidal wave. The two natural catastrophes did great damage to the town, the harbor, shipping facilities, and St. Thomas' reputation as a safe harbor (Brønsted 1952:299).

Improvements in the steamships of the period eliminated the need for using St. Thomas as a coaling station for ships from North America and Europe on their way to South America. St. Thomas' transit trade and usefulness as a coaling station was coming to an end. The gradual loss of population that resulted from the declining economy of the island also affected the Jewish community. The Synagogue, however, continued to serve the spiritual needs of the diminished congregation, which only numbered 141 in 1890 (Boxman 1983:28).

Following World War II, with the increase in air transportation and the development of

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tourism, the congregation has again grown in numbers. As the congregation has reached the second century of its founding (1796-1996) it is larger than it has ever been in the history of the St. Thomas Jewish community (Boxman 1983:28-32).

During the flourishing period of the first half of the nineteenth century, two people of national and one of international fame belonged to the Synagogue's congregation. David Levi Yulee, born on St. Thomas June 12, 1810, went to Florida as a young man where he became the chosen territorial delegate to Congress from the Territory of Florida in 1841, and later in 1845 when Florida was admitted to the Union, was elected as a United States Senator to Congress. Jacob Mendes da Costa was born on St. Thomas January 7, 1833, and became a noted American physician and writer. His numerous books on medicine and diagnosis were translated into several languages. Finally, the famed Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro was born on St. Thomas July 10, 1830 where he spent his early years. As a teenager he already showed an interest and aptitude for painting and later when he moved to Paris, he dedicated himself to art and he changed his name from Jacob Pizzarro to Camille Pissarro. It was in France his genius was first acknowledged, and he became known as the "Father of Impressionism" (Paiewonsky 1959:9-10; Boxman 1983:24-26).

**Summary**

The expulsion of the Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal, in 1492 and 1497, respectively, forced them to settle in Holland and northern Europe where existing guilds excluded them from earning a living in their traditional roles of middlemen who bought local goods and resold them to people within their community. By 1550, they had created an important new commercial niche -- as merchants facilitating the movement of goods between northern and southern Europe and later the movement and processing of New World products, such as sugar, tobacco, diamonds, and silver.

The Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam were tied to the fortunes of their adopted homeland of Holland. During the seventeenth century expansion of that country's overseas empire, Sephardic Jews settled in Brazil and later Dutch-held islands in the Caribbean Basin. When the Dutch overseas trading system began to wane in the eighteenth century, so too did the influence of these Jewish merchants. During the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-84), Great Britain attacked Holland for aiding the Americans in the Revolutionary War. Most of the Jewish financed Dutch-shipping was swept from the seas, and Dutch colonies in the Caribbean were seized. The seizure of St. Eustatius was a great blow to the Jewish traders in the Caribbean Basin, many of whom moved to the Danish colony of St. Thomas.

Here, this resilient community supported the founding and financing of sugar plantations in the Danish Virgin Islands and, later in the early nineteenth century, also in southern Puerto Rico. They also profited by the selling of coal to steamships traveling to South America from Europe and North America.

The St. Thomas congregation, founded in 1796, reached its zenith by the mid-nineteenth century. The congregation declined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the fortunes of the Danish Virgin Islands, but today has the largest congregation in its history. The St. Thomas synagogue, built in 1833, is the second oldest Jewish synagogue in the United States. It is surpassed in age only by Touro Synagogue (1763), in Newport, Rhode Island, which was designated a National Historic Site on March 5, 1946, and is an affiliated unit of the

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National Park Service. Touro Synagogue, however, was only occasionally used for worship between the 1820s and 1880s, making the St. Thomas Synagogue the oldest synagogue building in continuous use in the United States. The congregation of *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim* in Charleston, South Carolina was established in 1749 and erected its current house of worship in 1840. It was designated an NHL in 1980 in part in recognition of the synagogue being the second oldest extant in the country and the oldest in continual use. The St. Thomas Synagogue predates *Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim* Synagogue by seven years.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register. **Charlotte Amalie Historic District (7/19/76)**
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: # \_\_\_\_\_
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office **U.S. Virgin Islands**
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other(Specify Repository): Rabbi Stephen A. Schafer  
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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: 0.23 acres

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UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	20	295730	2029290

**Verbal Boundary Description:**

The boundary for the St. Thomas Synagogue and Synagogue Office consists of the parcel of land at #16AB Crystal Gade, in the Queens Quarters of Charlotte Amalie. It is bounded on the south by Crystal Gade (the name of the street), on the east by Crystal Gade #16C, on the west by Crystal Gade #15, and on the north by Lille Gronne Gade #3B.

**Boundary Justification:**

The Boundary for the St. Thomas Synagogue, Synagogue Office, and fence is the town lot at No. 16AB Crystal Gade, in the Queens Quarter of Charlotte Amalie. This has been the site of the three previous Jewish synagogues built by the St. Thomas Congregation.

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