

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 91001684

Date Listed: 11/29/91

Beth Israel Synagogue
Property Name

Fairfield
County

CT
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.

for Beth A. Savage

Signature of the Keeper

11-29-91
Date of Action

Amended Items in Nomination:

8. Statement of Significance: Period of Significance

The documented period of significance for the property is the same as the significant date, 1906.

This information was confirmed with John Herzan, CTSHPO, by telephone.

DISTRIBUTION:

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

1584

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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

historic name Beth Israel Synagogue
other names/site number Canaan Institutional Baptist Church

2. Location

street & number 31 Concord Street NA not for publication
city, town Norwalk NA vicinity
state CT code 06 county Fairfield code 001 zip code 06854

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	_____ buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____ sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____ structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	_____	_____ objects
		<u>1</u>	_____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing: NA
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

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] 10/09/91
Signature of certifying official Date
Director, Connecticut Historical Commission

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 Date

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:)

[Signature] 11-29-91

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious structure

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION/religious structure

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

LATE VICTORIAN/Moorish Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE/Sandstone

walls WOOD/Shingle

roof ASPHALT

other

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue, a shingled, Moorish Revival, 36' x 62', two-story structure (Photograph 1), was built in 1906, facing north on the southwest corner of South Main and Concord streets in South Norwalk. Now encased in vinyl siding, it retains most of its original features, notably its two distinctive onion-shaped domes. (Photograph 2) The present owner/occupant of the building is the Canaan Institutional Baptist Church.

In the facade, the central entrance above the high brownstone ashlar foundation is approached by a wide flight of steps, now with an iron railing rather than a wooden railing, as originally. The central section of the facade is recessed behind flanking corner towers. In the recessed section the door is off-center to the left but central in the elevation as a whole because the east tower is larger than the west. There are round-arched 1-over-1 windows on either side of the door. The upper sash of these windows are glazed in two sections; the upper section is round, while the lower section is round-arched. (Photograph 3) More windows of this description are located in the first floor of the towers and at the second floor of the front and side elevations.

The larger east tower, 10' x 10', supports a drum pierced by more of the distinctive windows (Photograph 4), now concealed by siding, on which stands a large onion-shaped dome. The dome once had a finial of the Star of David.¹ The smaller west tower, 8' x 5' also supports an onion-shaped dome, but without drum.

Since the building occupies a corner location, the east elevation is as visually prominent as the facade. The chief feature of the east elevation is a large stained-glass second-floor window. Its round-arched form fills space created by a strong cross gable. (Photographs 2, 5) On the rear is an exterior chimney, flanked by two tall round-arched windows (Photograph 6), while the west side elevation, relatively plain, shows clearly the diamond glazing of rectangular 1-over-1 windows at the first floor, which are also present on the east. The west elevation does not repeat the strong feature of gable and large round-arched window. (Photograph 7)

3. 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

Period of Significance
1906-1941

Significant Dates
1906

Cultural Affiliation
NA

Significant Person
NA

Architect/Builder
Unknown

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

The Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue is significant architecturally because it is the only known synagogue building in Connecticut displaying Moorish onion-shaped domes. Moreover, it is the only known frame example of an urban historic building in Connecticut constructed to be a synagogue; all others are masonry. Although not currently used as a synagogue, the building, well maintained except for the addition of siding, continues to exhibit its characteristic exterior features of onion-shaped domes and round glazing, and, on the interior, almost complete integrity.

Historical Note

Congregation Beth Israel was organized, c. 1865, by Jews from Germany who had emigrated to the United States and settled in Norwalk. As the century drew to a close, emigrants from eastern Europe, seeking to escape the pogroms initiated under the Czars, came to Norwalk in greater numbers and with their Orthodox persuasion dominated the congregation by 1906, when the synagogue was constructed. Prior to that time, services were held in rented halls; the Concord Street schul² was the congregation's first building of its own.

In 1972, following construction of a new synagogue, the Concord Street property was sold to the Canaan Institutional Baptist Church, which remains the owner/occupant to the present time. Use of a building first as a synagogue and then as a church, or vice versa, is not unusual in Connecticut. The Baptist Church has taken great interest in the care and maintenance of the building, all to good effect save for the addition of vinyl siding.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bloom, Ralph. Historic and Architectural Survey of Norwalk. Statewide Resource Inventory. Inventory Form, 28 July 1976, Connecticut Historical Commission, Hartford, 1976.

Ransom, David F. George Keller, Architect. Hartford: The Stowe-Day Foundation, 1978.

Slavitt, Robert, grandson of a member of the Beth Israel building committee. Interview, 6 June 1991.

Wischnitzer, Rachel. Synagogue Architecture in the United States. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955.

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 #
 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

Acres of property Less than one

UTM References 695 455 0060
A 18 632 740 4950 100
Zone Easting Northing

B Zone Easting Northing
D Zone Easting Northing

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property is described at Norwalk Land Records, Volume 799, Page 63.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary is drawn to encompass the land that has gone with the building since it was built.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By Reviewed by John Herzan, National Register Coordinator

name/title David F. Ransom, Consultant
organization Connecticut Historical Commission date 22 June 1991
street & number 59 South Prospect Street telephone 203 566-3005
city or town Hartford state CT zip code 06106

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The interior is basilican in plan. Two aisles divide the dark colored pews into three sections, with galleries, supported by cast-iron columns, on three sides. Two tall round-arched stained-glass windows in the front and the large window on the side provide ample natural light. Above, the deep coves of the ceiling are joined by truss-like tie beams in which the pierced window motif of circle over round arch is repeated. (Photograph 9)

When the building was a synagogue, Judaic iconography filled the round-arched paneled area of the south wall between the rear windows and above the ark. (Photograph 8) Today, the iconography has been removed, but otherwise little change has taken place. The tall round-arched windows are industrial steel sash in construction, glazed with translucent soft shades of green, blue, pink, and purple. The ceiling-hung light fixtures remain in place, the central fixture of lights supported at the ends of convex members surrounding a naturalistic centerpiece probably being older than the brass fixtures of clustered globes. (Photograph 9) Original eight-light candelabra on brass standards, symbolic of the Temple of David menorah, now flank a lectern which takes the place of the bimah from which the torah scrolls, then stored in the ark, were read during services. (Photograph 10)

The great window in the east elevation is filled at the top with a round composition the center of which formerly displayed a Magen David, now removed. (Photograph 11) The remaining original glass is an Islamic geometric pattern in shades of yellow, beige, and green, stronger colors than in the front windows.

Fluted cast-iron columns with Corinthian capitals support the galleries, where women sat. A row of paired C-curve brackets runs under the balconies, which have paneled fronts. (Photographs 12, 13) The motif from the windows, of circle over round-arched vertical member, perhaps characteristic of the Moorish revival, is repeated in the four wooden truss-like supports for the roof. The coved ceiling is covered with embossed metal. High on the north wall there is a Colonial Revival balustrade that once protected an open area or third-floor balcony. (Photograph 14) Its balusters are similar to those in the railing of the stairway leading from the first floor up to the balconies. (Photograph 15) A straight run of stairs at the north end of the building rises from the second-floor rear gallery to the balcony space, which is now closed off.

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The basement is a social hall with kitchen and offices, little changed since built. Doors, doorway surrounds, dado, and other trim appear to be original. Access directly from outdoors to the social rooms is through a double door under the main front exterior stairway.

A wrought-iron fence, older than the stair railing, runs along the sidewalks on both Concord and South Main streets. It is old and nearly intact, but does not appear in the historic picture. (Photograph 1) The chimney and ventilators flanking it in the gable end of the south elevation may be non-original features, as well.

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Architectural Significance

While there is no traditional architecture characteristic of synagogues, Jews over the centuries have endeavored to build their houses of worship to reflect contemporary architectural fashion and at the same time to indicate in some manner early Judaic ties to the East. One way to accomplish the latter objective was to use the onion-shaped domes associated with Moorish influence. The tendency to do so was, in the United States, followed more closely by congregations whose roots were in Eastern Europe than by German Jews, who were the other principal, and earlier, participants in immigration to America. The Eldridge Street Synagogue in New York's Lower East Side was a famous case in point. The Beth Israel congregation was following in these footsteps when it built on Concord Street.

While the onion-shaped domes are unusual details for Connecticut, the overall design of Beth Israel is entirely in the mainstream of Connecticut synagogue architecture. The configuration and characteristic features of the typical design are the central recessed section approached by wide steps, round-arched doorways at the top of the steps, fenestration at the second floor over the entrance, and flanking projecting towers with domes or other prominent decorative features on top. This overall design was established by the first building to be constructed in the state as a synagogue, Hartford's Temple Beth Israel (1876, George Keller, architect).³ The design of Temple Beth Israel was influenced by that of Central Synagogue at Lexington Avenue and 55th Street, New York City (1872, Henry Fernbach, architect⁴), which, in turn, followed after the famous Oranienburgerstrasse Temple, Berlin (1859, Edouard Knoblauch, architect).

The pattern was followed again in New Haven by Congregation Miskan Israel (1897, Brunner & Tryon, architects), which is perhaps the state's finest interpretation of the typical design because of its sophisticated proportions and restrained but elaborate detailing. More synagogues have been built in Connecticut since 1906 in variations of the design, which without the onion-shaped domes is essentially Romanesque Revival in style. All of them are in masonry. Beth Israel is the only known frame example .

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An additional feature of interest at Beth Israel is the shingle siding, which perhaps reflects a spill-over effect from popularity of the Shingle Style, or perhaps was in line with common usage of shingles along the shore line. In any event, the use in the same building of shingles and onion-shaped domes is unusual. On the interior, the quality of the detailing, the stained glass, the fine millwork, and the distinctive trusses combine to give a coordinated design of unusual quality.

¹Ralph C. Bloom, Curator of the Norwalk Historical Commission, interview, 3 June 1991. Mr. Bloom recalls seeing the finial in a post-card view of the synagogue.

²Schul is the Yiddish word for synagogue.

³Congregation Beth Israel was organized in 1843, the year in which, by act of the state legislature, it first became possible for Jews to hold public services. The congregation used already standing buildings until 1876

⁴Henry Fernbach was the first choice of Congregation Beth Israel for their new temple, but after giving him the commission the congregation decided his services were too expensive, and shifted to Keller. (See David F. Ransom, George Keller, Architect (Hartford: The Stowe-Day Foundation, 1978), p. 57.)

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Photographs were taken, or copied, in June 1991 by David F. Ransom. Negatives are on file at the Connecticut Historical Commission.

Photograph 1
Historic photo, no date
View southwest

Photograph 14
View northeast

Photograph 2
View southwest

Photograph 15
Foyer, view northeast

Photograph 3
Window, typical

Photograph 4
North tower
Drum and dome interior
View up

Photograph 5
View northwest

Photograph 6
View northeast

Photograph 7
View southeast

Photograph 8
Historic photo, no date, c. 1970

Photograph 9
View southwest

Photograph 10
Chancel, view south

Photograph 11
View southeast

Photograph 12
View northeast

Photograph 13
View northwest