

Honoring America's first synagogue

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Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas was the first native-born Jewish religious leader in the United States.

BY COLIN MIXSON

It's a schlep down memory lane!

Downtown history buffs are looking for community support to co-name a portion of South William Street after the first synagogue in the United States, which — despite popular myth — was not built in Rhode Island, but right here in Lower Manhattan.

“This site is the origin of all synagogues in North America,” said James Kaplan, president of the Lower Manhattan Historical Association. “This site was the first — and for most of its existence, only — synagogue in New York City.”

Kaplan is referring to the Mill Street Synagogue, a temple built in 1730 to serve the Spanish and Portuguese members of Congregation Shearith Israel at what is now 26 South William St. between Broad Street and Mill Lane.

The Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, is widely believed the country's first, but that temple was built in 1763 — more than 30 years after the Downtown synagogue — and is merely the oldest standing temple in America. And Congregation Shearith Israel dates back even further, being founded in Lower Manhattan in 1654 — 76 years before they built the temple of Mill Street.

Since it was the country's original Jewish house of worship, for the country's oldest Jewish congregation, Kaplan contends that all other denominations of the ancient religion in New York City owe their existence to the little-known temple.

“They all stem in a sense from the original congregation, which was Shearith Israel, before they broke up in the 1820s into various different groups,” Kaplan said.

The congregants of Shearith Israel, in addition to being true-blue New Yorkers, were also hardcore patriots, according to Kaplan, who described the Downtown Jews as fervent revolutionaries.

“They thought they’d get a better deal under the patriots,” said Kaplan. “They believed in American democracy, and were believers in religious freedom.”

When the British invaded and occupied Manhattan following the Battle of Brooklyn in 1776, the congregation’s leader, Gershom Mendes Seixas, known by some as the “Patriot Rabbi,” found himself unwilling to abide his Tory overlords, and instead led his people to the promised land of Philadelphia, where he built a congregation in exile as the Revolutionary War raged on.

When Washington finally drove the English off Manhattan on Evacuation Day in 1783, Seixas and his people returned to Downtown, and the Mill Street temple endured until sometime around 1820, when the building was demolished and the congregation headed up town to a spot in the Village.

To honor Downtown’s place in Jewish history, the Lower Manhattan Historical Association, in partnership with the Sons of the Revolution, the American Sephardic Federation, and the Temple of Universal Judaism, have asked members of Community Board 1 to support a request for signage on a lamppost outside the Dubliner restaurant co-naming South William Street as Mill Street Synagogue/Gershom Mendes Seixas Way.

The CBI’s Licensing and Permits Committee endorsed the proposal on March 14, and the full board is expected to vote on it at its March 27.

If the measure passes, it will go to City Council, and Kaplan hopes the vote will be in time to host an official unveiling on May 14, the date when President Truman announced recognition of the State of Israel 70 years ago.