

Harry A. Butowsky

Touro Synagogue

Newport, RI

In his prefatory article, Dwight Pitcaithley reflects on the geographical and temporal range of historic sites that illustrates the Hispanic heritage of our common past. One such site that illustrates this heritage is Touro Synagogue, in Newport, Rhode Island, an affiliated unit* of the national park system, designated as a National Historic Site in 1946.

Touro Synagogue, Newport, Rhode Island, and interior below. NHL Survey file photos.

Touro Synagogue, dedicated in 1763, is the oldest synagogue in the United States. It is the only one which survives from the colonial era. The congregation was founded in 1658 by descendants of Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal seeking a haven from religious persecution. Designed by noted colonial architect Peter Harrison, the Touro Synagogue is considered one of finest examples of 18th-century architecture in America.

Peter Harrison was born in England and came to Newport in 1740 and became a successful merchant. Proficient in 10 fields, from agriculture to woodcarving, Harrison is best known for his architectural achievements. Adopting the Georgian style of England, Harrison became the most notable architect in mid-18th-century America.

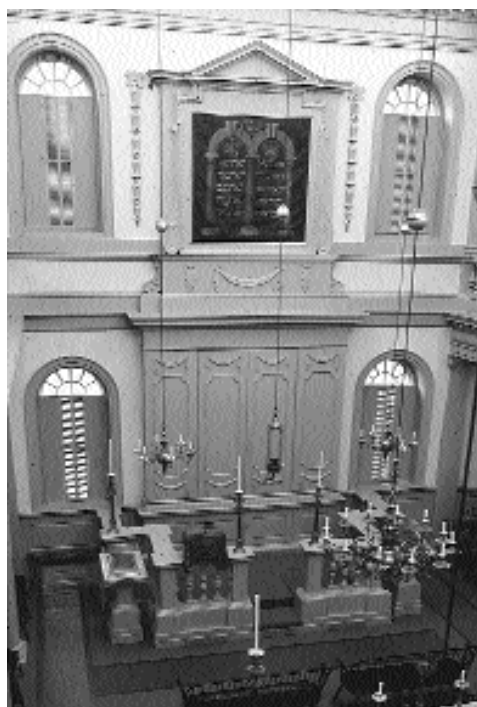
Examples of his work include King's Chapel, Boston; Christ Church, Cambridge; and the Redwood Library, the Brick Market and Touro Synagogue in Newport. Georgian architecture—so called because of its popularity in England during the reigns of the first three Georges—uses classical motifs as formalized by the ancient Romans. Symmetry, balance, ordered rhythm—these are terms descriptive of the style. In designing Touro Synagogue—often called his masterpiece—Harrison used the Georgian style, but



modified it to accommodate the Sephardic ritual. As was the custom of Sephardic Jews, the synagogue was inconspicuously located on a quiet street. It stands diagonally on its small plot so that worshippers standing in prayer before the Holy Ark face eastward toward Jerusalem. This symbolic placement gives an air of individuality to the synagogue and subtly insulates it from its surroundings. To the side, and somewhat affecting the symmetry of the synagogue, is the ell. It was designed primarily as a religious school for the children. The rigorously plain brick exterior gives no hint of the richness to be found within the building. Though abundantly furnished, the synagogue chamber is so well proportioned that an airy, even lofty, impression is given. Twelve ionic columns, representing the tribes of ancient Israel, support a gallery. Above these rise 12 Corinthian columns supporting the domed ceiling.

In the Orthodox tradition, women sit in the gallery and men sit below. The wainscoted seat running along the sides of the hall provided the only seating for men at the time of the synagogue's dedication. A raised section of this seat at the center of the north wall is used by the president and vice president of the congregation. Five massive brass candelabra hang from the ceiling. Two were the gift of Jacob Rodriques Rivera in the name of his son Abraham; they bear the date 1765. Another dated 1760 was presented by Naphthali Hart Myers; and the fourth, the gift of Aaron López, is dated 1770. The inscription on the large center candelabrum identifies it as a gift of Jacob Pollock in 1769.

In front of the Holy Ark hangs the Eternal Light, a symbol of the Divine Presence. It was presented to the congregation in 1765 by Samuel Judah of New York. The Holy Ark at the east end of the room contains the Scrolls of the Law, or Torah. Hand-lettered with special ink by scribes of great skill, these scrolls are the most sacred of Jewish objects. On them are recorded the Five Books of Moses, the source of Jewish faith. The



scrolls are mounted on wood rollers, two of which are decorated with exquisite colonial silver bell-tops. Above the Ark is a representation of the Ten Commandments in Hebrew, painted by the Newport artist, Benjamin Howland. In the center of the room is the Bimah, an elevated platform where the cantor intones the liturgy and reads the Torah. These holy objects, all rich in symbolism, give to the synagogue a profoundly religious atmosphere.

Touro Synagogue reflects the wide diversity represented within the continuity of our Hispanic heritage. By visiting Touro Synagogue, Americans are reminded of the diversity of this heritage.

Additional information on Touro Synagogue can be found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.tourosynagogue.org/>.

*Affiliated units of the national park system are historic sites that are closely linked in importance and purpose to existing units of the national park system but they are not counted as units of the national park system. They are generally owned by state and local authorities or by private entities. Affiliated areas of the national park system are similar to our national parks in that they preserve and interpret important segments of our nation's heritage.

Harry A. Butowsky is a historian with the NPS and a frequent contributor to CRM.

Hispanics in the Civil War

America's Civil War touched the lives and divided the loyalties of the nation's Hispanic population as it did everyone during that tumultuous time. From the first shots at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, in 1861, to the last action at Palmito Ranch, Texas, in 1865, Hispanics were involved in every aspect of the war and made notable contributions on behalf of their chosen sides.

People of Spanish heritage lived in all parts of the country. Some traced their ancestry to explorers and pioneers who had settled in the United States several generations ahead of the English; others were recent immigrants, born in Cuba or other Latin American countries and drawn to America for education, employment, or land. Those who joined the war effort represented all economic and social levels—from wealthy aristocrats fighting to preserve their way of life, to impoverished laborers seeking to change their lives. Like other Americans, Hispanics entered the war for reasons of patriotism, private beliefs, or personal gain. And, like other Americans, they were divided by the conflict: names such as Gonzales, Garcia, Perez, and Sanchez appeared on the rosters of both Union and Confederate armies.

Spanish Roots

Spain once laid claim to much of the land that stretches from Florida to California. Its campaign of exploration and conquest began with Christopher Columbus and continued for three centuries. As early as 1526 settlers from Hispaniola arrived at what is present-day South Carolina, and through the 1500s and 1600s the Spanish pushed westward and northward, estab-

lishing missions, trading posts, colonies, and presidios. By the mid-19th century and the approach of the Civil War, Spanish roots ran especially deep in two diverse parts of America: in the Gulf states, particularly Louisiana, and in the Southwest.

Hispanic soldiers supported Louisiana's war effort both at home and in the field. The City of New Orleans mustered nearly 800 Spanish soldiers as part of the "European Brigade," a home guard of 4,500 that was to keep order and defend the city. Other Louisiana regiments also recruited Hispanics. Harry T. Hays' Brigade, popularly called the "Louisiana Tigers," and William E. Starke's Brigade included native Louisianans of Anglo and Creole descent, plus men from Spain, Cuba, Mexico, and other Latin American countries. Both brigades campaigned with Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in the eastern theater of the war and saw action at the major battles of Antietam and Gettysburg.

Other Gulf Coast states also mustered Hispanics into the military. One Alabama company, the Spanish Guards, was made up exclusively of men with Spanish surnames and served as a home guard for Mobile. Two regiments—Alabama's 55th Infantry which served in the Vicksburg, Atlanta, and Nashville campaigns, and Florida's 2d Infantry which fought at Antietam and Gettysburg—included a number of Hispanic soldiers.

Hispanic participation was greatest in Texas and the territories of the Southwest: Arizona, California, and New Mexico. As elsewhere, Hispanics in the Southwest had divided loyalties when the Civil War began. In Texas and New Mexico, where bitter feelings lingered from the Mexican War, some Hispanics sided with the Union. Others, tied politically and economically to the fortunes of the South, sided with the Confederacy.