

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic B'Nai Jacob Synagogue

and/or common N/A

2. Location

street & number Nissley and Water Streets

N/A not for publication

city, town Middletown N/A vicinity of

state Penna. code 042 county Dauphin code 043

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	N/A in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	N/A being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Chevra B'Nai Jacob Synagogue

street & number Box 241

city, town Middletown N/A vicinity of state Penna. 17057

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Dauphin County Courthouse

street & number Front and Market Streets

city, town Harrisburg state Penna. 17101

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title None has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date N/A federal state county local

depository for survey records N/A

city, town N/A state N/A

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one	
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved	date <u> </u>
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed			<u> </u> N7E

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

B'Nai Jacob Synagogue is a simple yet architecturally refined one story house of worship which, when constructed, was probably the religious counterpart to the traditional one room schoolhouse. The front gabled-end facade is distinguished by brick recessed panels within which are placed pointed arch window and doorway fenestration. The gabled end is accented by a circular window, divided into eight lights, and capped with a Star of David ornament. All windows are pointed arch and contain leaded stain glass. With the exception of an enlarged front stoop, constructed of brick to compliment the building's brick composition, the exterior is unaltered from its original appearance.

The Synagogue's interior contains an entrance area, one large room as an auditorium with balcony, a small ante-room at the front of the building, and full basement in which covered over religious cleansing baths are located. The interior remains unaltered since the time of the Synagogue's construction in 1906 (with the exception of isle carpeting). The auditorium features original brass light fixtures and center chandelier, wainscoting on the walls, carved wooden balcony railings (and an elaborately balustraded staircase to the balcony off the front foyer), and central Bimah; the Bimah being the central focal point of worship. Also significant is the Holy Arch, containing the "Torah", which is supported by a neo-classical framework of columns and entablature.

The building is situated on a small tract of land which marks the northwestern terminus of Middletown's older, latter 19th Century neighborhoods. Within recent years, commercial development has proliferated the area directly across Water Street from the Synagogue as its fronts on U.S. Route 230 approximately one block away. This commercial development includes a bank, fast food restaurant, supermarket and shopping center-like complex. Future commercial demands in the area may threaten the Synagogue as "higher and better" use of the surrounding real estate is achieved.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below					
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religion		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation		
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)		

Specific dates	Builder/Architect	Charter members of Synagogue
1906		

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

B'Nai Jacob Synagogue was erected in 1906 and has survived to this day as the oldest building erected as a synagogue and continuously operated as such in Dauphin County. Additionally, B'Nai Jacob is the only remaining synagogue in Central Pennsylvania which was built to fulfill the old world, orthodox requirements of Mosaic Law. Although B'Nai Jacob is not the oldest Jewish congregation in the County, such as Ohev Sholom established in the 19th Century, all current synagogue buildings in the County, other than B'Nai Jacob, were constructed later and after 1920 (i.e. Ohev Sholom, Beth El, Keshet Isreal, Eastern Star, and Chisuk Emuna).

Just prior to the end of the 19th Century, principal centers of Jewish populations in America, similar to other ethnic groups, were concentrated in large urban areas. Small towns and rural environments were dominated by the Protestant majority, especially in Central Pennsylvania. However, pioneer Jews began to settle in smaller agrarian towns of inland areas in search of new lives and opportunities and the type of small town atmosphere which they left behind in their European homelands. Still strictly governed by orthodox Hebrew law, both close proximity to house of worship and mandated quorums made it necessary to quickly attract Jewish communities to these towns so that synagogues could be established.

Specifically, Mosaic Law provided that; 1) one could not walk farther than three kilometers from a place of residence on the Sabbath or holidays unless living within a "walled city;" and 2) a quorum of ten males, thirteen years or older, was required in order to perform any or all Jewish services. Therefore, Jewish synagogues grew in small towns, rather than in low density rural areas, to accommodate a nearby neighborhood congregation of sufficient size to meet the quorum.

These factors resulted in the erection of B'Nai Jacob as Middletown's first and only synagogue; the building actually designed and personally constructed by its charter members. Middletown was selected for the establishment of a Jewish community also because it was on the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad for easier transportation access to friends and family back in the major metropolitan centers and because it was within close proximity to Harrisburg which could offer back-up employment if the families' trades (e.g. peddlers, shoemakers, tailors, etc.) failed. Because the congregation was small in a practically all Protestant community, the Synagogue's exterior architectural style, Gothic Revival, was intended to blend with the Gothic Revival Protestant churches which were common at the time. As Jewish populations grew, and a sense of architectural heritage was rediscovered, Mid-Eastern styles were employed in later synagogues in Dauphin County (such as Temple Beth El, Front Street, Harrisburg). B'Nai Jacob's interior, because it was not exposed to public view, was designed to be orthodox in layout reflecting the persuasion of the congregation. This is evidenced by the separate seating arrangement (balcony for the women; main floor for the men) and by the location of the Bimah in the center of the worship room.

(CONTINUED)

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B'Nai Jacob Synagogue, Dauphin County

Continuation sheet 1

Item number 8

Page 2

This central location is traditional, however increasing in rarity in this country. This is because the Jewish reformed movements of the 20th Century, in which many orthodox congregations were absorbed, changed synagogue physical layouts to more conventional auditorium seating with Bimahs in the front similar to alters, pulpits and lecterns. One of the other synagogues in America which contains the central Bimah is the country's oldest; the Truro Synagogue (N.R.) in Newport, R.I.

Additionally, B'Nai Jacob contains several Torahs, which are over two hundred years of age, and hand made Perochots. When the Synagogue was erected, its pews were brought from the old Dauphin County Courthouse (demolished) in Harrisburg when the Courthouse was remodeled.

As Central Pennsylvania became more urbanized and transportation more efficient, the Middletown Jewish worshipers joined the larger synagogues of Harrisburg as was common in other regional Pennsylvania cities resulting in the decline of the small town synagogue. However, a small number of devoted heirs of the original B'Nai Jacob congregation have maintained and protected the Synagogue as unchanged, both in structure and religious dogma, from essentially the day it was erected unlike its "sister" synagogues which have long since vanished (e.g. Tipereth Israel in Steelton). This has preserved Dauphin County's oldest link to orthodox Jewish worship.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Ambrose Klain, congregation member and retired Professor of Urban and Regional Planning of the Pennsylvania State University.
 Irwin Richman, Professor of American Studies, the Pennsylvania State University.
 Middletown Press and Journal, 11/21/81; Harrisburg Patriot News, 10/30/81.

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property .25 acre

Quadrangle name Middletown

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

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Verbal boundary description and justification Beginning at a point on the southwest corner of Nisley and W. Water Streets; thence west/southwest approx. forty five feet six inches (45'6"); thence south/southeast approx. sixty feet (60'); thence east/northeast approx. forty five feet six inches (45'6"); thence north/northwest approx. sixty feet (60') to point of origin.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

state N/A code N/A county N/A code N/A

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jeb Stuart

organization Consultant

date 2/1/85

street & number 1226 Green Street

telephone (717)232-1226

city or town Harrisburg

state Penna. 17102

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature



title Dr. Larry E. Tise, State Historic Preservation Officer

date 8/10/85

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number _____ Page _____

Continuation of history of Bnai Jacob Synagogue/ Middletown.

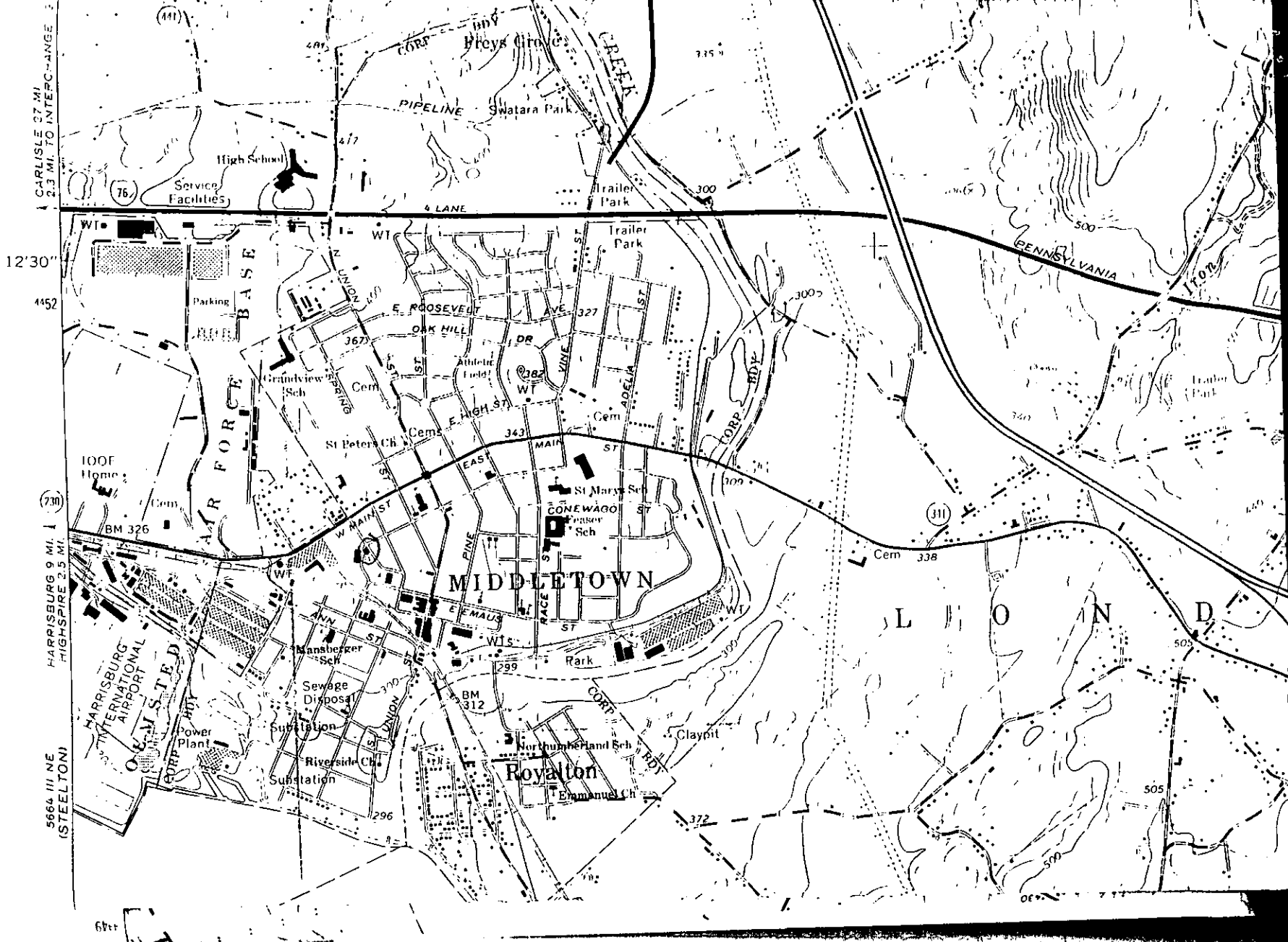
Conversation with Betty Orstein, August, 1997:

She noted that the congregation came from the town of Poucelat, Kovno, Lithuania. The synagogue was built to resemble their former synagogue in Lithuania.

Comment: Virtually the entire Central Pennsylvania Jewish community of the 1880-1900 period came from Kovno (state) in Lithuania. Most of the communities were in the northern part of that province near the border with Corland. Names like Pasvalys and Joneskis and Zagare appear time and time again in the histories of Harrisburg Jewish families who immigrated about this time. However, this is the first I have heard that the Middletown congregation was from one town. This is inkeeping with traditions of teh time. In Pittsburgh at this point there were over twenty congregations, each from its own separate town in Eastern Europe. This reflected religious differences as well as a desire to be with one's kinsmen as Lithuania was the home of classical Orthodox Judaism (study of Talmud). Contrasting were those Jews from Galicia who had a heavy dose of Chassidism (religion of emotion as well as rules). This has so changed since WWII that Jews today in the US remember very little of these regional doctrinal differences which were so important in 1900. At any rate, Mrs. Orstein's comment that they congregation in Middletown used to say "Poucelat in Middletown" when referring to the synagogue should be part of its history file.

Bruce BAZELON
8/14/97

B'Nai Jacob
Dauphin Co
Zone 18 E



CARLISLE 27 MI
2.3 MI. TO INTERCHANGE

12'30"

452

(730)

HARRISBURG 9 MI.
HIGHSPIRE 2.5 MI.

5664 III NE
(STEELTON)

67

(76)

(41)

(31)

505

375

300

300

343

338

300

372

500

740

505

500

CORP

CORP

CORP

CORP

CORP

CORP

CORP

High School

Service Facilities

Swatara Park

Trailer Park

Parking

BASE

Grandview Sch

Cem

St Peter's Ch

Com

100F Home

BM 326

HARRISBURG INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Power Plant

Substation

Riverside Ch

Substation

296

PIPELINE

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