

“Etched in Stone” / “Outlined in Shadows”:
The Twentieth-Century Lives of American Sephardic Cemeteries

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Abstract

This project investigates conceptualizations of American Jewishness through the twentieth century by tracing the dynamic ‘lives’ of Sephardic cemeteries in New York City and Newport, Rhode Island. It brings the fields of memory and cemetery studies into conversation with histories of Sephardic identity-making in America. I posit cemeteries as archives and methodological touchstones, arguing that they were loci of encounters between Iberian, Ottoman, and Ashkenazic Jews at key moments in the twentieth century. As I demonstrate, these sites embodied the dynamism of Sephardic self-conception in the United States in a way that makes them critical spaces for the study of untold histories today. I look to commemorations, tensions, and forms of neglect in these cemeteries to better understand how the sites were shaped by changing Jewish existences and how they, too, transformed the lives and memories of American Jews.

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Left: “Chatham Square Cemetery Among the Tenements,” painting by Lionel S. Reiss;¹
Right: Contemporary photograph of the Chatham Square Cemetery from St. James Place.²

“Eleventh between Fifth and Sixth.
A small triangle outlined in shadows.
Names in Spanish, Portuguese. Illegible.
A few dates dragged through time.
Old dust of old Jews. And marble. And grass.
Five or six graves for recounting death.”

..

Dead in a dead cemetery.
They’re here and no one knows.”³

- Octavio Armand, circa 1980, translated from Spanish

¹ Lionel S. Reiss, “Chatham Square Cemetery Among the Tenements,” early twentieth century, in *Portraits Etched in Stone: Early Jewish Settlers 1682-1831* (Columbia University Press, 1952), 3.

² Original photograph of the Chatham Square Cemetery by Adam Idelson, March 2025.

³ Octavio Armand, “Segundo Cementerio,” circa 1980, trans. Carol Maier, in *Sites: A Bimonthly Series on Buildings, Places and Monuments*, 1980, pamphlet, from the archives of Shearith Israel (New York City), folder: “Historic Cemeteries.” Full poem cited in section four, Shearith Israel’s Colonial Burial Grounds, Post-War.

Introduction

In the heart of Lower Manhattan, three colonial Jewish burial grounds sit quietly decaying, their gates locked to the public. When the Inquisition swept the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, several hundred Sephardic⁴ Jews fled to the Americas, some settling in cities of the Northeast where they established the region's earliest Jewish synagogues and cemeteries. In New York, members of the Sephardic congregation Shearith Israel consecrated the city's first Jewish burial ground in the late seventeenth century. The site, in early years called "New Bowery" and later "Chatham Square," opened to burials in 1682. As Chatham Square filled up in subsequent years, the congregation established two more cemeteries nearby in 1805 and 1829. Now, Chatham Square rests on St. James Place at the southern edge of Chinatown; a short walk away, Shearith Israel's second and third cemeteries are located on West 11th and 21st Streets.

For centuries, these cemeteries have quietly evidenced American Jewish life in New York's colonial period. But over time their stones weathered. In the late twentieth century, Octavio Armand wrote that the old burial grounds had become "outlined in shadows."⁵ Armand, a Cuban poet, exile, and New Yorker, published the above poem, "Segundo Cementerio," in the 1970s-80s, reflecting on the Sephardic sites' neglected appearance and seeming invisibility to passersby. "They're here and no one knows," Armand lamented.⁶ Meanwhile, historical scholarship cast analogous shadows on Shearith Israel's cemeteries. While David de Sola Pool's seminal work of 1952, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, chronicled the sites' history from colonial times to the nineteenth century, their contemporary histories—their *full lives*—remain untold.

⁴ Sephardic, descendants (often distant) of Jewish communities in medieval Iberia. See Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History* (New York University Press, 2009).

⁵ Armand, "Segundo Cementerio," in *Sites: A Bimonthly Series on Buildings, Places and Monuments*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Miles from these Manhattan burial grounds, Shearith Israel established a fourth, larger, and currently active cemetery in 1850 called Beth Olam. Beth Olam sprawls across the border of Brooklyn and Queens and houses a diverse collection of interments: Gravestones of past and contemporary Sephardic congregants, monuments belonging to an Ashkenazic congregation, and a stylistically distinct, sequestered section towards the middle whose gravestones often mention Turkey. In cemetery records from the early part of the twentieth century, this section of Beth Olam, located on Plot Number 128, was reserved for burials of “Oriental Jews.”⁷

While Shearith Israel’s earliest burial grounds appear static, contained, and quiet in busy Manhattan, Beth Olam presents a jumble of architectures, borders, and diverging sects of Jewishness, noisy and dynamic in its Queens-Brooklyn locale. These four cemeteries, all belonging to the same Sephardic congregation, tell seemingly incompatible stories about the imprint of Sephardic Jews in New York. But I am precisely interested in these untold rifts across time, city space, and American Jewishness, etched permanently into the visible cemetery setting. Together, these cemeteries reveal underlying tensions, less visible, in Jewish self-conception and memory formation in the twentieth-century United States, particularly for groups who came to identify as Sephardim.

At the turn of the century, New York became a site of encounter between two central communities of Sephardic diaspora: Iberian and Ottoman Jews. The Iberian Jewish community had mainly arrived to the Americas during the colonial period immediately following the Inquisition; the Ottoman Jewish community, comprised of Turkish, Balkan, Greek, and Syrian

⁷ *Records of Interments in Beth Olam Cemetery*, mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, bound manuscripts, from the archives of Shearith Israel (NYC).

Jews (many of whom still spoke Ladino⁸), had fled from Iberia to Ottoman lands post-Inquisition. As the empire declined in the late nineteenth century, however, many of these Jews then migrated to the United States. By the late twentieth century, Jewish historians and community members alike referred to these groups, together, as ‘Sephardic.’ The two waves of diaspora have sometimes been differentiated with the terms “Western Sephardim” and “Eastern Sephardim,” or the “Old Sephardim” and “New Sephardim.”⁹

However, for most of the twentieth century, usages and meanings of Sephardicness in American contexts remained murky. Assimilated Iberian and Ottoman Jews contended with their separate national allegiances while reuniting in the United States with ‘brothers’ from other lands. Devin Naar, a historian whose work is central to this project, has argued that the concept of Sephardicness did not emerge organically. Rather, the term “Sephardic” or “Sephardi” was “self-imposed,” consciously adopted by these Jewish communities in the early-to-mid twentieth century through a movement called the “Sephardi Campaign.”¹⁰

Contemporary historians of both the ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ Sephardic diasporas in America continuously renegotiate linguistic terminology surrounding these communities, lately avoiding the term “Sephardic” altogether. In Laura Liebman’s work, which looks mainly at the ‘Western’ Sephardic diaspora in the colonial Americas, she tends towards phrases such as “Port Jews,”¹¹ “Early American Jews,” and the “Jewish Atlantic World.”¹² Liebman hesitates to

⁸ Ladino, also known as “Judeo-Spanish,” a language which mixes Hebrew, Turkish, Spanish (Castilian), Portuguese, Aramaic, Italian, French, Greek, Arabic, and others. See Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History*, 16-17.

⁹ Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*, 6-7, 19, 109-110.

¹⁰ Devin E. Naar, “‘Sephardim Since Birth’: Reconfiguring Jewish Identity in America,” in *Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in America*, ed. Saba Soomekh (Purdue University Press, 2016), 76.

¹¹ Laura Liebman, “Sephardic Sacred Space in Colonial America,” in *Jewish History*, Vol. 25, No. 1, special issue on Synagogue Architecture in Context (Springer Nature, 2011), 13-41.

¹² See Laura Liebman, *Messianism, Secrecy, and Mysticism: A New Interpretation of Early American Jewish Life* (Valentine Mitchell, 2012), Introduction. Noted also in conversation with PhD Joseph Weisberg, of Brandeis University.

generalize the population (a small but non-insignificant group of whom were of Ashkenazic descent) and instead emphasizes the centrality of their mobility and status as merchants. Historians of the modern United States, who often contend with encounters between the “Western” and “Eastern” Sephardic diasporas, hesitate to use the language of Sephardicness as well, but for other reasons. Firstly, the unifying term “Sephardim” can become confusing when describing diverse communities. Further, Ladino-speaking immigrants in the United States themselves often rejected the term “Sephardic” for its non-particularity, especially in the early part of the twentieth century.¹³ As Naar has noted, “the definition of the concept of ‘Sephardi’ remains an on-going process,” even today.¹⁴

There emerges, then, a symmetry between the *historical* problem of how ‘Sephardic’ Jews belonging to various webs of migration conceptualized their own identities in America, and the *historiographical* problem of how scholars should approach categorizing those identities in academic work. It remains unclear how to write about a community that has conceived of itself in dynamic, mystifying, and sometimes quasi-imaginary terms.

In this project, I posit cemeteries as both archives and methodological touchstones for bridging the gap between American Jewish self-conception, memory, and historiography. In “Sites of Memory,” Jay Winter argues that memorial sites such as cemeteries “are topoi with a life history.” Their lives begin with physical construction, go through an “institutionalization” period whereby commemoration practices are routinized, and finally, often “fade(s) away with the passing of the social groups that initiated the practice.”¹⁵ Drawing on Winter, I trace moments in the dynamic twentieth-century “lives” of Sephardic cemeteries in New York and

¹³ Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*, 2.

¹⁴ Naar, “‘Sephardim Since Birth’: Reconfiguring Jewish Identity in America,” 76.

¹⁵ Jay Winter, “Sites of Memory,” in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (Fordham University Press, 2010), 312.

Newport, Rhode Island, to explore simultaneous transformations in conceptions of American Jewishness. As palimpsests of memorialization, these cemeteries embodied the interplay between modern American Jewish and Sephardic discourses, memories, and socialities.

The historical contexts of mass migration, colonial revivalism, and global crisis at critical points in the twentieth century frame this project, as they shaped the ways in which Jews inhabited these Sephardic cemeteries and, in turn, the statements they made about their own memories and identities in the United States. In the next four sections, I look to moments of commemoration and conflict at these sites amongst self-designated Sephardic, ‘Oriental’/Ottoman, and Ashkenazic Jews to understand how these communities harnessed memories of Sephardicness—or deliberately rejected them—in forging modern claims to belonging in the United States and abroad.

First, I explore how Shearith Israel’s cemeteries in New York City and the Colonial Jewish Burial Ground in Newport invoked forms of mythology surrounding Jewish patriotism and conceptions of homeland in colonial North America. Further, I analyze moments when these cemeteries became sites of contestation surrounding the Sephardi Campaign, Ottoman Jewish immigration, and Ashkenazic claims to Sephardic space. I then turn to these sites’ lives in the postwar period, investigating their role as local memorials for city dwellers reckoning with an age of global change and trauma.

While this project is attuned to American Sephardicness as a developing twentieth-century concept, the fact of these cemeteries’ Iberian Jewish origins does not imply that their more contemporary story is consistently a ‘Sephardic’ one. In other words, I allow events, records, and literatures surrounding these cemeteries to tell their own histories, paying constant attention to Sephardic self-conception in these spaces but acknowledging that growing narratives

of general American Jewishness sometimes eclipsed Sephardicness, especially given that the category was (and is) so slippery. While I do not overlook those instances where Sephardicness is absent, I also search for hints that notions of Sephardic memory remained at work, even without the presence of the term itself. Part of my goal, then, is to reorient the current landscape of Jewish memory in the United States by exploring the cultural, intellectual, and social histories that emerge from Sephardic memorial space, telling a familiar but texturized American Jewish story from a marginal focal point.

My primary source materials come from the archives of Shearith Israel, the Newport Historical Society, and the Center for Jewish History (CJH), as well as the American Sephardi Federation (ASF) and American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), both of which are housed at the CJH. From these archives, I have collected and analyzed tourist pamphlets and memorabilia, event invitations, commemorative speeches, popular and personal literature, correspondences between congregations, individuals, and other institutions, and historic newspaper articles. In Shearith Israel's archives, I look closely at the congregation's interment records and cemetery plot designations, notices on burial ground preservation and maintenance, and meeting minutes from their Board of Trustees and Sisterhood. The second section of this paper also draws upon primary documents from the collection *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History*.

In the following pages, I contextualize the development of Sephardicness amongst Jews in the United States and consider the methodologies of leading scholars in the field, including Devin Naar, Aviva Ben-Ur, Devi Mays, and Laura Liebman. Then, I place historical work on American Sephardicness into conversation with the field of Jewish cemetery studies in the United States, which remains limited almost exclusively to the study of Ashkenazim.

As many historians have pointed out, encounters between different groups of Jews in North America laid bare differences between Iberian, Ashkenazic, and Ottoman Jewish traditions and rituals; in the context of this project, these moments of contact also illuminated differences and similarities in burial practice. While the cemeteries of Ashkenazim and ‘Western’ Sephardim often looked similar in the United States by the mid-to-late nineteenth century, primarily because of assimilation into American cemetery aesthetics, there remained several important differences.

Whereas Ashkenazic graves were marked mainly by headstones (vertical gravestones), other vertical monuments, and inscriptions primarily in Hebrew and English, colonial Sephardic gravesites in America often featured both headstones and ledger stones (“horizontal slabs”), a practice that followed early Iberian burial styles and was likely influenced, too, by practices of North Africa and the Middle East.¹⁶ The colonial Jewish burial grounds in New York and Newport follow this practice, featuring both headstones and ledger stones with inscriptions in Hebrew, Spanish, Ladino, and English. After the physical burial, these Jewish communities held similar memorial services, called “yahrzeit” amongst Ashkenazim, and “meldado” amongst Ladino-speaking Sephardim of the ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ diasporas alike.¹⁷

Ottoman Jewish or ‘Eastern’ Sephardic burial rituals were similar to early Iberian practice, with horizontal ledger stones and inscriptions primarily in Ladino and Hebrew; in North America, these inscriptions also included some English. Jewish tombstone inscriptions in the Ottoman Empire tended to include iconographies consistent across different sects of Judaism, such as *Menorot* (plural of *Menorah*, or candelabra), hands in prayer, and Stars of David, often

¹⁶ Rabbi Joshua L. Segal, *A Field Guide to Visiting a Jewish Cemetery: A Spiritual Journey to the Past, Present and Future* (Jewish Cemetery Publishing LLC, 2005), 50-51; 5.

¹⁷ “Meldado: Jewish Memorial Services and the Boundaries of Sacred Space,” University of Washington Sephardic Studies Program, 2019; Lehmann, Matthais B. *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2005).

related to the deceased's past professional life. Ottoman Jews also used poetry and other gravestone inscriptions to mythologize the glory of Turkish Jewry and the "great figures of Jewish Spain."¹⁸

Interestingly, in Beth Olam Cemetery, graves in the "Oriental Jews" section followed the most traditional Sephardic burial styles. Nearly every "Oriental" gravestone is marked by a headstone and ledger stone, carved with Hebrew, English, and occasionally Ladino lettering. By contrast, the other Sephardic graves in Beth Olam are often marked only by vertical headstones, a potential sign of assimilation into broader American Jewish burial practice. While records of Beth Olam's stylistic decisions in the "Oriental" section are limited, it is likely that members of the Ottoman Jewish community, who enjoyed autonomy over their Jewish practices in the former Empire,¹⁹ had been able to maintain more classical forms of Sephardic burial ritual compared with members of the 'Western' diaspora in North America.

In any case, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, members of the 'Western' Sephardic diaspora in the United States had facilitated a sharp divide between themselves and newer immigrants of the "East." Often, Shearith Israel used terms like "Oriental" or "Balkan" to describe Ottoman Jewish immigrant communities in New York, as is contemporarily displayed in the records of Beth Olam.²⁰ In the second section of this thesis, I examine the creation of Beth Olam Cemetery's "Oriental" section to explore emerging tensions between Sephardic brotherhood and otherness in New York City.

Devin Naar and Aviva Ben-Ur contend that by the 1920s, members of the 'Western' and 'Eastern' Sephardic diasporas had acknowledged a mutual need for unity. Recent Ottoman

¹⁸ Devin E. Naar, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 252-253.

¹⁹ Naar, "*Sephardim Since Birth*": *Reconfiguring Jewish Identity in America*," 79-80.

²⁰ Naar, "*Sephardim Since Birth*," 83.

Jewish immigrants required economic and social support as they adapted to the “new setting of America,” and Iberian Jews needed numbers as they attempted to assert themselves as a strong, unified group in Jewish city life, distinct from Ashkenazim (who made up the majority of Jews in New York).²¹

Often, the dissemination of Sephardicness took place via the “Sephardi Campaign,” a movement first sparked and spread by the popular New York Ladino Press. Advocates of the Campaign emphasized “forgetting” attachments to the “old world,” stressing that adoption of the term ‘Sephardic’ would create a unified sense of modern Iberian Jewish identity.²² In turn, the Campaign also contributed to the development of the “Sephardi mystique,” a growing mythological sense of homeland and belonging in medieval Iberia.²³ Thus the Sephardi Campaign reflected both the necessity amongst these Jewish communities to unify, and the continued prominence of ties to Spanish, Ottoman, and other Jewish homelands.

Devi Mays approaches these changing conceptions and adoptions of Sephardicness with a fluid, mobile conception of identity. In her work, Mays relies little on the language of Sephardicness, Ottoman association, or even Jewishness, and instead places migrant status and citizenship as her focal points. In several cases, including that of Syrian Jews in New York, she assesses the differences between “performed” identities, those harnessed to strategically survive or succeed, and “conceived” identities, true notions of belonging, which often become entangled in the case of American Sephardim.²⁴ Importantly, Mays looks at individual lives through family

²¹ Ibid.

²² Naar, “‘Sephardim Since Birth,’” 90.

²³ Naar, “‘Sephardim Since Birth’: Reconfiguring Jewish Identity in America,” 76.

²⁴ Devi Mays, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 8.

papers and legal documents in order to understand the ways in which migrants “conceived of their world” and “ensured space for themselves and others within them.”²⁵

Laura Liebman similarly employs a framework of hyper-mobile identity, but instead to analyze the lives of ‘Western’ Sephardic Jews in the colonial Americas. Liebman’s use of the categories “Atlantic Jews” and “Port Jews,” particularly in place of “Sephardic,” as discussed earlier, stresses that members of these communities had diasporic, dynamic identities that changed depending on where they were located. In demonstrating this idea, Liebman’s methods centralize material culture and everyday objects, relics of changing diasporic livelihoods.²⁶

However, Liebman departs from Mays in her focus on overarching “Jewishness” rather than more particular ethnic-Jewish categories, such as Iberian, Syrian, Salonican, or Ottoman.²⁷ Between Mays and Liebman, there emerges a tension between scholarship of the ‘Western’ Sephardic diaspora, which often associates itself with Jewish Studies, and scholarship of the ‘Eastern’ Sephardic diaspora, which seems to exist between the fields of Jewish, Ottoman, and American immigrant studies.

While histories of American Jewish cemeteries tend to deal with Ashkenazic sites, the field more broadly illuminates dynamic forms of immigrant identity and has the potential to bind otherwise disparate histories of Jewishness in America. In *Till Death Do Us Part: American Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed*, Allan Amanik analyzes how rural Jewish cemeteries in the United States, which emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century, encapsulated a “duality” of Jewish American identity: The “particularity” of Jewishness, as demonstrated by sharp borders and exclusive death practice, versus growing feelings of “belonging” amongst

²⁵ Mays, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora*, 12.

²⁶ Liebman, *Messianism, Secrecy, and Mysticism*, 3-4.

²⁷ Liebman, *Messianism, Secrecy, and Mysticism*, 3, 9.

Jews as they assimilated into American society, embodied by the adoption of American rural cemetery aesthetics.²⁸

Here, “rural cemetery aesthetics” refers to the rural cemetery movement, a trend beginning in Europe and spreading to the United States by the mid-nineteenth century whereby urban burial grounds were gradually replaced with garden-style cemeteries in the suburbs or outskirts of cities.²⁹ Importantly, the aesthetics and symbolic dualities of American cemetery landscapes pointed to emerging conceptions surrounding Jewish belonging in America, which is a theme I return to throughout this paper.

Furthermore, Amanik treats cemeteries as active rather than passive spaces. Cemeteries in the United States not only reflected socio-political dynamics amongst Jewish communities, but also actively contributed to those dynamics. For example, Amanik notes that the ways “Americans have separated themselves in death” did not merely demonstrate “persistent social hierarchies shaping the nation, but also played some role in reinforcing them over time.”³⁰

Drawing on Amanik’s work, Sephardic cemeteries inform both the content and methodology of this project. I demonstrate how these cemeteries pushed American Jews to reimagine their own identities through commemoration and categorization of their dead, making these sites important archives of Jewish self-consciousness and memory formation. I also trace these sites through time to argue that the dynamic nature of Sephardic and (other) Jewish self-conceptions in the twentieth century United States may be best studied through analogously

²⁸ Allan Amanik, “‘A Beautiful garden consecrated to the Lord’: Marriage, Death, and Local Constructions of Citizenship in New York’s Nineteenth-Century Jewish Rural Cemeteries,” in *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed*, ed. Allan Amanik and Kami Fletcher (University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 16-20.

²⁹ Amanik, *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed*, Introduction; Richard E. Meyer, “Strangers in a Strange Land: American Ethnic Cemeteries in America,” in *Ethnicity and the American Cemetery*, ed. Richard E. Meyer (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 1-13.

³⁰ Amanik, *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed*, 4.

dynamic spatial and memory-oriented methodologies. In placing the field of American Sephardic history into cemetery space, I draw on methods in spatial analysis, memory studies, and literary history. As a result, this thesis is grounded in the physical cemetery but also extends outside its gates, into the city, and beyond.

Note on Terminology

Terminology surrounding Jewish communities and spaces in this paper are chosen with intention. Wherever possible, I refer to Jewish communities in the ways they have referred to and conceived of themselves at specific moments in time. I use the terms “Sephardic” and “Sephardi,” then, primarily where individuals and communities identified themselves as such. Still, since part of my point is that Sephardicness was slippery throughout the twentieth century, I also employ the term for clarification and to establish distinctions between communities of American Jews.

Additionally, I use “Iberian Jewish” and “Spanish and Portuguese–Jewish” at times to refer specifically to colonial Jews in North America and their twentieth-century descendants (oftentimes members of Shearith Israel); “American Sephardic,” in talking about second-and-later-generation Sephardic residents in the country; “Ashkenazic” and “Ashkenazim” in describing Jews of Central and/or Eastern European descent; “Ottoman Jewish,” in referring to Turkish, Syrian, Balkan, and Greek Jews coming from formerly Ottoman lands; “Turkish Jewish,” to refer specifically to Ottoman Jews who migrated from what is now Turkey and were often most involved with Shearith Israel; and “Oriental Jews” (often employing quotations to emphasize its use at the time), to talk about Ottoman Jews who identified this way—a topic I explore in detail in this paper’s second section on Beth Olam Cemetery.

In addition, I use terms like “American Jewish” and “American Sephardicness,” rather than “Jewish American” or “Sephardic Americanness,” to emphasize that while Jewish communities in this paper maintained intersectional identities, they often conceived of themselves as Jews and/or Sephardim before Americans—in these cases, “American” comes first as a descriptor. Further, central to this project are the terms “Sephardicness” and “Jewishness,” which I use not to refer to religiosity, ethnicity, or cultural practice, per se, but rather to understand how Jews conceived of their own pasts and presents through acts of memory.

Last, I want to note my use of language surrounding cemetery space. The terms “burial site” and “cemetery” are umbrella terms, encompassing all kinds of land where the dead are buried, whereas “burial ground” is a term mainly associated with sites established before the rural cemetery movement of the mid-nineteenth century. Because I deal mainly with colonial burial sites, I often use the terms “burial ground” and “cemetery” interchangeably. In the case of Beth Olam, however, which was established in 1850, I exclusively use the term “cemetery” to signal its later establishment and emphasize its rural cemetery aesthetic, which I provide more detail on in the following sections.³¹

³¹ See Segal, *A Field Guide to Visiting a Jewish Cemetery*, Preface; I also avoid using the term “graveyard” because it is most often affiliated with church spaces.

Cemetery Photographs: New York City and Newport, Rhode Island³²

Shearith Israel's Three Colonial Burial Grounds (Manhattan, NYC):

Chatham Square Cemetery:



*Left: View of the cemetery from St. James Place;
Right: View from the Southwest side of the cemetery.³³*



View of the cemetery's interior between bars of the surrounding fence.³⁴

³² Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are original to this paper.

³³ Original photographs by Adam Idelson, March 2025.

³⁴ Ibid.

21st Street Cemetery:



*Left: Outside gate at Shearith Israel's 21st Street cemetery;
Right: View of the west side of the cemetery.³⁵*



Panorama view of Shearith Israel's 21st street colonial burial ground.³⁶

³⁵ Original photographs by Talia Fader Idelson, November 2024.

³⁶ Ibid.

11th Street Cemetery:



*Left: Fence surrounding the 11th street cemetery;
Center & Left: The cemetery's interior, facing east & south.³⁷*

Shearith Israel's Fourth Cemetery, Beth Olam (Queens-Brooklyn, NYC):



Left: Entrance to Beth Olam; Right: pathway down a mausoleum-style section of Ashkenazi graves.³⁸

³⁷ Photographs by Talia Fader Idelson, November 2024.

³⁸ Photographs by Talia Fader Idelson, January 2025.



Left & Right: Views of the “Oriental Jews” section of Beth Olam, Plot Number 128.³⁹

The Jewish Burial Ground in Newport, Rhode Island:



*Left: View of the burial ground from center;
Right: View of Touro family plot from center.⁴⁰*

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Photographs by Talia Fader Idelson, September 2024.



Memorial Tablet marking the front of the Newport cemetery, by the gate.⁴¹

⁴¹ Ibid.

Shearith Israel's Colonial Burial Grounds, 1900-1930s: American Sephardicness and the Colonial Revival

In the Fall of 1932, a crowd stood congregated on Manhattan's Lower East Side in their caps, coats, and *kippahs*,⁴² just inside the gates of Chatham Square burial ground. In attendance were members of the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) and Sons of the American Revolution (S.A.R.), the Rabbi of Shearith Israel and his wife, members of the Sephardic congregation, and other city residents curious about colonial Jews. This jumble of New Yorkers, Jews and non-Jews alike, had eagerly come to the Sephardic cemetery that day for an event organized by the D.A.R.: A ceremony to mark the graves of Jewish soldiers who fought in the American Revolution.



D.A.R. Decorates Graves
*Members of the D.A.R. and Shearith Israel at Chatham Square Cemetery on November 13, 1932.*⁴³

In an official invitation card, the Manhattan chapter of the D.A.R. encouraged its members to join them in “commemorating” the legacies of “five distinguished American patriots of the Revolutionary War.”⁴⁴ Shearith Israel, too, invited its Sephardic congregants, some of them distant descendants of those interred in Chatham Square, to bear witness to this “historical

⁴² *Kippah*, a traditional head covering worn by Jewish men.

⁴³ “D.A.R. Dedicating Tablets to Distinguished Patriots,” November 14, 1932, newspaper clipping, unmarked publication, from the Center for Jewish History (NYC), Box 6, folder: “Shearith Israel.”

⁴⁴ *Invitation to the D.A.R.'s Dedication Ceremony*, 1932, invitation card, Center for Jewish History (NYC), Box 6 folder: “Shearith Israel Congregation - Chatham Square Cemetery.”

ceremony” whereby women of the D.A.R. would “dedicate tablets on the graves of five American patriots.”⁴⁵ Curiously, neither Shearith Israel nor the D.A.R. mentioned that these “American patriots” were Sephardic Jews. Perhaps to the congregants of Shearith Israel, this fact seemed self-evident; to the D.A.R., a generalized atmosphere of American patriotism must have seemed a better way to maximize event turnout.

But the D.A.R.’s presence in Chatham Square, and its members’ physical and ideological interactions with the graves of Sephardic Jews, produced a curious fusion of patriot American and Sephardic memories. This moment of commemorative mingling and institutional collaboration hinted that American imagination of colonial life had come to include the story of Sephardic Jews, and inversely, that Congregation Shearith Israel had folded American patriotism into their own conception of Sephardic heritage.

New interest in sites of Jewish colonial life and death in the United States, such as this ceremony, developed along with the burgeoning American colonial revival movement. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Americans cast “retrospective and historicizing vision” on the nation’s past, bringing back aesthetics and ideals of the colonial era to formulate a sense of modern American identity linked to nostalgia for the country’s birth. The colonial revival was an ideological movement that took form in popular fashions, architecture, and everyday practice. Importantly, revivalists also developed American heritage sites, museums, and historic preservation initiatives, from the notorious Plymouth Plantation to exhibits full of restored antique furniture.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *Invitation to the Join Shearith Israel at the D.A.R.’s Dedication Ceremony*, 1932, invitation card, Center for Jewish History (NYC), Box 6, folder: “Shearith Israel Congregation - Chatham Square Cemetery.”

⁴⁶ Richard Guy Wilson, “What is the Colonial Revival?” in *Re-creating the American Past: Essays on the Colonial Revival* (University of Virginia Press, 2006), 1-4.

In doing so, American revivalists sometimes muddled the meaning of ‘colonial’ itself, placing less emphasis on its historical time frame, which formally ended with the Revolution, and instead centralizing the import of its atmosphere and aesthetics. “Colonial,” then, came to encompass life during European settlement of the thirteen colonies, the Revolutionary War, early years of the nation, founding fathers, and beyond. Importantly, the colonial revival was predicated on the importance of physical sites of memory and American “heritage,” folding selected landscapes into collective memories of American identity.⁴⁷

As architectural historian K.M. Barry has outlined, “the American people could re-envision their heritage through a patriotic lens” via restorations of colonial infrastructure and commemorative space in the built environment, using these sites as “a way to understand a collective colonial identity.”⁴⁸ Revivalist architecture and new emphasis on the preservation of historic sites coincided with the widespread adoption of the rural or garden cemetery movement. By the end of the nineteenth century, primarily due to public health concerns and a lack of city space, this movement pushed cemeteries in the United States outside of crowded cities and encouraged garden landscaping styles; urban burial grounds were either displaced or became historic sites.⁴⁹

In many ways, this revitalized interest in ‘colonial’ life, physical sites of patriot memory, and aversion to city cemeteries evidenced the white American response to widespread industrial urbanization and immigration in the United States. Both the colonial revival and rural cemetery movements “looked to a romanticized past for inspiration and answers to modern problems.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ K.M. Barry, “Buildings as Artifacts: Heritage, Patriotism, and the Constructed Landscape,” in *Architectural Histories*, 5(1), (2017), 3. <http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.189> <https://journal.eahn.org/article/id/7533/>

⁴⁹ Amanik, *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethnic Cemeteries as Borders Uncrossed*, Introduction

⁵⁰ Mary Miley Theobald, “The Colonial Revival: The Past That Never Dies,” research.colonialwilliamsburg.org, Accessed March 8, 2025.

Thus the revival emerged as a twentieth-century, nativist-tending construction of home in colonial times which protected against arriving immigrants' "old world" notions of transnational homeland. Revivalists heroicized figures of the American Revolution, constructing mythologies of patriotism as they emphasized the importance of white settler ancestry dating to the colonial period.⁵¹

Land and genealogy became important prerequisites to claiming a sense of belonging and "authentic" connection to homeland in North America. The Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution formed in the late years of the nineteenth century, emphasizing patriot belonging by forming exclusive and elite social clubs. Usually, chapters of the D.A.R. and S.A.R. had funds for the preservation and maintenance of historic sites, a system where "pure" American blood determined and financed the nation's tourist destinations, ensuring the perpetuity of their patriotic narratives.⁵² In this context, the D.A.R.'s event at Chatham Square in 1932 seemed to designate the Sephardic cemetery an American heritage site, a Jewish agent of the colonial revival.

But the D.A.R.'s commemoration of Chatham Square Cemetery formed just one example of Shearith Israel's participation in the renaissance of American patriotism. Amidst the crisscrossing currents of immigration, colonial revival, and the rural cemetery movement in early twentieth century New York, members of Shearith Israel reckoned with the simultaneity of their American and Sephardic identities. In this period, the congregation collaborated with American patriot and landscaping organizations at Chatham Square Cemetery and proliferated mythologies of the site's patriotic American past, shaping a new kind of colonial revivalism that centralized the legacy of Sephardic Jewish space at the birth of the nation.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See Wilson, "What is the Colonial Revival?" Introduction.

In May of 1903, Shearith Israel teamed up with the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society (ASHPS) and the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) to host a memorial tablet ceremony at Chatham Square Cemetery, an earlier iteration of the D.A.R.'s event in 1932.⁵³ The ASHPS, founded in 1895, was known for its preservation work in garden cemeteries and American heritage sites; its goal in the early twentieth century was to “save from obliteration names, places, and objects identified with local, state and national history.”⁵⁴ Complementarily, the AJHS had formed in 1892, based upon the recently developing field of American Jewish historical study. At the ceremony, representatives from the synagogue and the AJHS spoke, as well as the Preservation Society’s non-Jewish founder, a renowned Jewish businessman in New York, and the Mayor of the City himself.⁵⁵



Left: 1903 print of the tablet designed to mark Shearith Israel’s first Jewish burial ground;⁵⁶ Right: Photograph of this tablet at the cemetery’s gate, 2021.⁵⁷

⁵³ *Invitation to the Chatham Square Dedication Ceremony*, 1903, invitation card, from the Center for Jewish History (NYC), Box 6, folder: “Shearith Israel Congregation - Chatham Square Cemetery.”

⁵⁴ *The American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society: The Society’s Three-fold Work*, early twentieth century, brochure/pamphlet, Center for Jewish History, folder: “American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society.”

⁵⁵ Leon Hühner, “The Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Cemetery on New Bowery: The Oldest Jewish Cemetery in the United States. An Historical Sketch,” *Program for the Dedication of a Memorial Tablet at Chatham Square Cemetery*, 1903, speech/address, from the Center for Jewish History (NYC), Box 6, folder: “Shearith Israel Congregation - Chatham Square Cemetery.”

⁵⁶ Image featured in *Invitation to the Chatham Square Dedication Ceremony*, 1903, Center for Jewish History.

⁵⁷ Photograph from “First Shearith Israel Graveyard/Chatham Square Cemetery,” 2021, Visiting a Museum: The Unique, Unusual, Obscure and Historical, visitingamuseum.com.

In one such speech, Leon Hühner, curator of the AJHS and affiliate of Shearith Israel, introduced mythologies of Chatham Square Cemetery in the American Revolution. According to legend, Hühner said, one section of the patriot army had used the Sephardic burial ground—then referred to as the “Jews burying ground”—as a temporary (if fleeting) army base during the Revolutionary War. Hühner admitted that the cemetery’s location, atop a hill on the then-Southern end of the city, facing the East River, may have been a practical choice for an army base. Still, Hühner insisted that beyond practical use, the cemetery possessed a patriotic quality that Washington and his army alone could recognize. Even if the burial ground was not selected for its patriotic Jewish character, he argued, its employment as a revolutionary outpost made it a site of patriotism for all time afterwards. For him, occupation and use by Washington and his army infused the cemetery with patriotism, rendering it an American patriot site regardless of whether those buried there were patriots themselves.⁵⁸

Complementarily, Hühner documented the site’s “abuse” by British soldiers: “Tradition has it,” he said, “that in order to offend the Jewish rebels, the British after taking New York, purposely used the Jewish cemetery as a place for parading and shooting deserters and prisoners of war.” A faithful historian, he doubted that British use of the cemetery, like its use by the Patriots, had been intentional. Hühner wrote, “it seems far more reasonable to suppose that the British, like their opponents, used the high ground of and about the cemetery for purposes of fortification.” Still, Hühner later speculated that based on Revolutionary-era reports, the myth carried at least some semblance of historical fact.⁵⁹ Even more, the truth of these myths seemed less important to Hühner than the fact of the tales’ existence and believability. True or not, the

⁵⁸ Hühner, “The Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Cemetery on New Bowery: The Oldest Jewish Cemetery in the United States. An Historical Sketch,” from the Center for Jewish History.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

stories proved that patriot Jews had circulated memories about the colonial cemetery for generations.

The AJHS's curator was not alone in taking up an interest in the patriot mythologies of colonial Sephardic burial grounds. David de Sola Pool, Rabbi and scholar of Shearith Israel in the early-to-mid twentieth century, wrote a similar myth of British abuse of Chatham Square Cemetery into his seminal history book, *Portraits Etched in Stone*. In it, he cited a popular legend amongst Shearith Israel's congregants that, during the Revolutionary War, British soldiers had melted down parts of the cemetery's gate and grave markers to make bullets for their army.⁶⁰

Mikveh Israel, Philadelphia's first Jewish congregation (connected to Shearith Israel in the colonial period), published a brochure in the mid-twentieth century that spun similar tales about its own colonial burial ground. It read, "Legend has it that when the British occupied Philadelphia in 1777, Redcoats would execute army deserters against the cemetery wall."⁶¹ Between the similarities of New York and Philadelphia's burial ground mythologies, Shearith Israel and Mikveh Israel alike must have harnessed stories floating across the cities as they each made claims to patriot Jewish legacies in the Northeast.

Patriot myths based in these Sephardic cemeteries and circulated amongst Jews at memorial events were no doubt entangled with the American colonial revival. In memorial and tourist pamphlets, like Mikveh Israel's brochure and Shearith Israel's event program, the tales' basis in fact or fiction seemed to matter little; of more importance was their role in coding early Jewish burial grounds in America as patriot heritage sites. But the myths also raised confusions

⁶⁰ See David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, Preface.

⁶¹ "The Oldest Jewish Cemetery in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania," circa 1980, brochure/pamphlet, from the American Sephardi Federation at the Center for Jewish History (NYC), folder: "Mikveh Israel."

about whose history the congregations and American patriot organizations sought to memorialize, and what kind of story they were telling. Narratives of Americanness, Jewishness, and Sephardicness often seemed interchangeable at these cemeteries, members of the D.A.R. shoulder to shoulder with Sephardic descendants of colonial Jews beneath the earth.

By the 1920s, another form of Jewish colonial mythology had spread through Shearith Israel, this time using its cemeteries to establish a sense of homeland and continuity across both colonial and contemporary New York City. In 1929, the congregation invited “members and friends” to participate in what they termed a “Memorial Day Pilgrimage.” The event would begin at the 21st Street Cemetery in the morning, move to “New Bowery” (Chatham Square), and finish off at the “Long Island Cemetery” (Beth Olam) by early afternoon. On May 30th, the day of the event, President Hendricks and Rabbi David de Sola Pool led congregants in marking and decorating, with American flags, the graves of Jewish veterans of the American Revolution (in New Bowery) and War of 1812 (in the 21st Street and Long Island cemeteries).⁶²

Shearith Israel’s invention of this Memorial Day Pilgrimage adds new dimensions to the established scene of Jewish American colonial revivalism. Chiefly, the framing of this event as a “pilgrimage,” a holy path whereby present congregants could “return” to sites sacred and historic to their past selves, suggested that Shearith Israel was constructing a sense of folkloric Sephardic homeland in colonial North America. This pilgrimage mapped the twentieth-century boroughs of New York onto an imagined landscape of the city during the colonial period, using the congregation’s burial grounds, which existed in both eras, as a physical tether between the two. In fact, the Memorial Day Pilgrimage seemed to serve an analogous purpose to genealogical

⁶² “To the Members of the Congregation,” *Invitation to Annual Memorial Day Pilgrimage*, May 1929, from the Center for Jewish History (NYC), folder: “Shearith Israel Congregation: Chatham Square Cemetery, Memorial Services, 1929.”

investigation for other colonial revivalists. In both cases, the revisiting of mythological pasts through spatial and ancestral journeys allowed revivalists, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, to both locate colonial pasts in the present and project their present selves into the colonial period, thereby creating a continuous sense of American belonging.

In some ways, Shearith Israel's conception of Sephardic homeland in colonial North America shifts the ways in which historians have theorized about American Sephardic mythology at large. For example, Devin Naar has importantly noted that communities who adopted the term "Sephardic" in the early twentieth century, by way of the Sephardi Campaign, often in turn established themselves as "legitimate heirs of the legacy and grandeur of medieval Spanish Jewry." Sephardic identities in the United States were then bound up with the "Sephardi mystique," which located a mythological sense of homeland in the "golden age" of Jewish life in medieval Iberia.⁶³

While Sephardicness undoubtedly often held a sense of connection to medieval Iberia, perhaps for American Sephardic Jews in New York, this "mystique" also involved the conception of a homeland closer to their lives in the United States. Through mythologies and commemoration of their historic cemeteries, the Jews of Shearith Israel created a sense of homeland rooted in the colonial period of North America. Thus, the Sephardic congregation imagined a kind of 'Sephardi mystique' bound up not just with the "myth of Golden Age Spain,"⁶⁴ but also with the American colonial revival, the 'golden age' of North America. In many ways, they conceived of the birth of the American nation as the birth, too, of the American Sephardic Jew.

⁶³ Naar, "'Sephardim Since Birth': Reconfiguring Jewish Identity in America," 76.

⁶⁴ Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History*, 131.

In doing so, Shearith Israel's cemetery pilgrimage entangled emerging Jewish, Sephardic, and colonial American categories of identity. In documents from the congregation's archive, it remained unclear what sort of holy "pilgrimage" Shearith Israel had intended to lead. In one sense, the congregation advertised almost exclusively to members of its synagogue and included only its own Sephardic burial grounds, suggesting that this was primarily a pilgrimage situated in Sephardicness. However, nowhere did the congregation use the term "Sephardic" to describe the ceremony, pointing to the possibility that Shearith Israel had framed the event as a 'Jewish' pilgrimage more generally. Even further, the congregation had led the pilgrimage on Memorial Day, decorated Jewish graves with American flags and motifs, and made no note of religious prayers during the route.⁶⁵ Perhaps Shearith Israel sought, then, to frame this pilgrimage not as Jewish but rather as American. While these possibilities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, Shearith Israel's choices surrounding the Memorial Day Pilgrimage must have shaped congregants' experiences of their own history in different ways.

Ultimately, Shearith Israel's mythmaking, commemorations, and collaboration with American patriot institutions in Chatham Square Cemetery revealed two central consequences for American Sephardicness. First, these practices pointed to the possibility of an American Sephardic homeland located not merely in medieval Iberia, but also in colonial North America, thereby entangling ideas produced by the Sephardi Campaign, 'Sephardi mystique,' and colonial revival in the United States. Second, because these forms of cemetery revivalism revealed growing ties between Sephardic, Jewish, and American memories of the colonial period, they foretold of tensions, internal and external to Shearith Israel, that would come along with shifting constructions of Sephardic belonging in the 'New World.'

⁶⁵ "To the Members of the Congregation," *Invitation to Annual Memorial Day Pilgrimage*, May 1929, Center for Jewish History (NYC).

Shearith Israel's Fourth Cemetery, Beth Olam: 'Oriental Jews' & the Emergence of a Divided Sephardic America

Bound up with the colonial revival and mythologies of American Sephardicness in New York, in the early twentieth century members of Shearith Israel faced a moment of encounter with Jews arriving from the Ottoman Empire. At this time, the congregation's fourth cemetery, Beth Olam, became increasingly active with new interments. The congregation had established the newer cemetery in the mid-nineteenth century, in part to accommodate their growing numbers as city space dwindled and prices soared in the colonial sites of Manhattan. In the 1910s, Shearith Israel began to provide burials for Turkish Jews, many of whom had settled on the Lower East Side near Chatham Square.

When I visited Beth Olam for research, mixtures and borders in the cemetery confused me. The site's landscape appeared in the style of the rural cemetery movement, with grassy hills, marble mausoleums, and winding pathways framed by trees, calling back to notions of spatial assimilation into modern America, as described by Allan Amanik. The mausoleums, as I soon discovered, belonged to B'Nai Jeshurun, an Ashkenazic congregation that Shearith Israel shared the cemetery space with since it sold part of the land to them in the 1920s.⁶⁶ Whereas Ashkenazic and Sephardic graves mixed in Beth Olam, both in contemporary space and via friendly correspondences in the archive,⁶⁷ graves of Turkish Jews stood together in a separate section towards the middle of the cemetery.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Shearith Israel made little documentary distinction between burials of Jews born in Turkey, Eastern Europe, North, South, and Latin

⁶⁶ *Letter from Trustees of Shearith Israel to the Trustees of the Congregation B'Nai Jeshurun*, May 15, 1923, letter, from the archives of Shearith Israel (Newark, NJ): *Meeting Minutes of the Board of Trustees*, 241.

⁶⁷ For more on relations between B'Nai Jeshurun and Shearith Israel, see Shearith Israel's *Meeting Minutes of the Board of Trustees*, 241-242, 272.

America, and otherwise. The congregation's earliest documentation of Turkish Jewish presence in Beth Olam Cemetery was in 1910, when the congregation made note of a man named Isaac Bitton, who had died that May. In general interment records, Shearith Israel marked Bitton's "Nativity" as "Turkey." He was buried in a "Regular Row" (as opposed to a "Family Plot" or "Child's Row") on Plot Number 20.⁶⁸ Still, in these years Shearith Israel had not yet separated Turkish Jewish graves from the rest of its congregants.

However, the growing Ottoman Jewish community's presence in New York and combined effects of city diseases, poverty and close quarters in tenements of the Lower East Side, and natural processes meant that Turkish Jewish gravestones began to fill New York's cemeteries. Before 1914, organization for the community's dead remained informal and unclear. Debates over "Oriental" Jewish burials, and whether they were to be buried in Sephardic cemeteries or generally Jewish ones, brought up new questions about how Turkish Jews fit into the established landscape of American Jewish memory.

In answer to those questions, 1914 proved a landmark year for the organization of the Turkish Jewish community in New York. That March, the Hebrew Free Burial Society announced in the popular Ladino periodical *La America* that it would, from that point on, cease providing burials for Turkish Jews because Shearith Israel had formally taken up that responsibility. The congregation's Sisterhood confirmed the Free Burial Society's "non-burial of Orientals" at a meeting the same month, also noting that "the committee formerly known as the Committee on Sephardic Jewish Immigrants be known hereafter as the Committee on Oriental Jews."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ "Dates of Death and Interment," 1910, bound manuscript, from the archives of Shearith Israel (Newark, NJ): *Beth Olam Interment Records*.

⁶⁹ *Minutes of the Sisterhood of Shearith Israel*, March 1914, bound manuscripts, from the archives of Shearith Israel (Newark, NJ), 26-27.

The Sisterhood's meeting had outlined several interrelated but potentially paradoxical changes in Shearith Israel's conception of the Turkish Jewish community. First, Shearith Israel had taken responsibility for Turkish Jewish burials, ostensibly in the hopes of creating a sense of unity amongst 'Sephardim.' However, the congregation had simultaneously ceased referring to the community as "Sephardic" in organizational documents, changing the name of the "Committee on Sephardic Jewish immigrants" to the "Committee on Oriental Jews."⁷⁰

In a meeting on March 16, 1914, Shearith Israel's Board of Trustees laid out a plan to grant "Associate Membership" to Turkish Jews and established a special plot reserved for their burials. In an official notice, Trustees of the congregation stated that so long as the "Oriental community" abided by the "Laws" of Shearith Israel and paid the congregation a small monthly fee of 50 cents, their "associate membership" would include access to a synagogue on Orchard Street, on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Sephardic style services, and burial rights for members and their immediate families in Beth Olam.⁷¹

The Trustees recommended that Hebra Hased Va'Ameyt, an affiliated philanthropic burial society established in 1802 which provided plots and burial services for the "indigent,"⁷² purchase a plot of land in Beth Olam for the so-called "Orientals."⁷³ Shearith Israel's president soon approved the document, and Plot Number 128 in the cemetery came into existence. By 1915, not only had the number of Beth Olam interments with "Turkish Nativity" skyrocketed with growing waves of immigration from Ottoman lands, but Shearith Israel had also officially

⁷⁰ *Minutes of the Sisterhood of Shearith Israel*, March 1914, 26-27.

⁷¹ See *Meeting Minutes of the Board of Trustees*; David and Tamar de Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World* (Columbia University Press, 1955), 443-444.

⁷² "Hebra Hased Va'Ameyt," Shearith Israel, Accessed March 15, 2025, <https://www.shearithisrael.org/giving/hebra-hased-vaamet/>.

⁷³ "To the President and Board of Trustees of Congregation Shearith Israel," March 16, 1914, official notice, Shearith Israel (Newark, NJ): *Meeting Minutes of the Board of Trustees*, 461.

begun to inter Turkish Jews in Plot Number 128 with the marking “Associate Member: Oriental Jews” next to each surname in their burial records.⁷⁴

In the Trustees’ 1914 document, however, it remained unclear whether Turkish Jews’ designation as ‘indigent’ working-class immigrants or as ‘associate members’ had led to the establishment of their plot as separate from the “Regular Row” interments. Practically speaking, Plot Number 128’s funding by Hebra Hased Va’Amet (rather than by Shearith Israel or members of the Turkish Jewish community itself) necessitated the creation of a separate plot, even if Shearith Israel had not ‘othered’ the Turkish Jewish community intentionally. At the same time, the plot’s isolation from the rest of the cemetery seemed inseparable from its designation as “Oriental.” Just as Turkish Jews’ immigrant status meant they often struggled to make ends meet, it too meant that the community was often othered by more assimilated Jews in the city.

Alternatively, the separation of Plot Number 128 from the rest of the cemetery, and its designation as the section for “Oriental Jews,” may have come at the request of members of the Turkish Jewish community itself. While the term “Oriental” was undeniably wrapped up in developing ideas of the “East” and “West” in American ideology of the modern period, Ottoman Jews first arriving to the United States often used the term as their preferred self-identifier. As historians Julia Phillips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein have noted, Ottoman Jewish “émigrés announced themselves as Orientals who hailed from an Eastern empire,” oftentimes not realizing that in the United States the term was “associated with East Asian and South Asian immigrants, who faced widespread legal discrimination and prejudice.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ “Dates of Death and Interment,” 1915, from the archives of Shearith Israel (Newark, NJ): *Beth Olam Interment Records*.

⁷⁵ Julia Phillips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “‘Sephardi but not Oriental’: A Polemic in New York (1914–1915),” in *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History*, ed. Julia Phillips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (Stanford University Press, 2014), 342.

Indeed, Shearith Israel's renaming of the "Committee on Oriental Jews," which had exchanged the language of Sephardicness for "Oriental," followed the Ottoman Jewish community's self-designation. In May of 1912, Moise Gadol, Joseph Gedalecia, and Albert Amateau, Ottoman Jewish leaders involved in the Ladino Press and various other immigrant Jewish groups of New York, established The Federation of Oriental Jews. Their goal was to merge all existing societies for recent Ottoman Jewish immigrants, which were small and dispersed throughout the boroughs, into one central body. The Federation stressed that widespread use of the term "Oriental" would create a sense of collective identity and belonging amongst Ottoman Jewish immigrants across New York.⁷⁶

Joseph Gedalecia was a particularly fierce advocate for use of the term "Oriental" rather than "Sephardic," insisting that it allowed Turkish Jews in America to maintain a sense of connectedness to Ottoman lands left behind, where they had formed their sense of Jewish identity in the first place. In 1914, Gedalecia argued that "'Oriental' expresses the Turkish Jew, and we are nothing but Turkish Jews; although we have passed under the dominion of other countries, we still have the old characteristics." He went on to urge Federation members that the Turkish Jew was essentially "Eastern," rejecting the idea that the essence of Jewishness was "Western."⁷⁷ With this defense of "Oriental" Jewry, Gedalecia denounced Shearith Israel's American Sephardi 'mystique' of the "New World" and, instead, argued that Turkish Jews should continue identifying with what he called the "Old World."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ "A Short, Short History of the Federation of Oriental Jews of America, Inc.," 1976, manuscript, from the Center for Jewish History (NYC), AR-1, Box 13, folder: "Federation of Oriental Jews, History."

⁷⁷ "[Testimony of Joseph Gedalecia]," from David de Sola Pool, "Levantine Jews," *Jewish Charities IV*: 11 (June 1914), 29–30, in *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History*, 343.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

In part, Gedalecia's fervent defense of Oriental Jewry emerged in response to the growing role of Shearith Israel in New York's Sephardi Campaign. The congregation's Sisterhood had taken interest in the "Oriental" community, establishing forms of housing, education, and philanthropy in the 1910s to encourage controlled forms of Turkish Jewish participation in American Sephardic life. The Sisterhood established a settlement house for "Oriental Jews" on Orchard Street on the Lower East Side, which included a synagogue, housing, and, eventually, schools called "Talmud Torahs" for immigrant children.⁷⁹ By the Spring of 1914, Shearith Israel had officially incorporated the Orchard Street Synagogue into the congregation, and burial records from the "Oriental Jews" section of Beth Olam indicated that growing numbers of Turkish Jews and their families resided in the Orchard Street settlement house.⁸⁰

In response to the "Inauguration" of a new Talmud Torah school in Harlem in 1917, one member of the Sisterhood wrote, "I look forward to the day when there will be one strong centralised system of religious education among the Sephardim." For her, there was "no more urgent duty" than "educating all the Sephardic children."⁸¹ This woman's sentiment, along with her consistent use of the term "Sephardic" despite the Ottoman Jewish community's own resounding use of the term "Oriental," was evocative of the Sephardi Campaign at large, which sought to unify various immigrant communities of the city under the category of Sephardicness. On a larger scale, the Sisterhood's settlement house on Orchard Street, burial plot for "Oriental

⁷⁹ See "Minutes of the Oriental Committee of the Sisterhood of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in the City of New York, Incorporated: Neighborhood House, 86 Orchard Street," *Minutes of the Sisterhood of Shearith Israel*, from the archives of Shearith Israel (Newark, NJ).

⁸⁰ *Records of Interments in Beth Olam Cemetery*, 1915, from the Archives of Shearith Israel, 49.

⁸¹ *Letter from an Unnamed Member of the Sisterhood of Shearith Israel to the Young Men's Sephardim Association*, August 5, 1917, from the archives of Shearith Israel (Newark, NJ), Box: "Sisterhood - 'Oriental' Jews Corres. - 1912-1917."

Jews,” and development of Talmud Torah schools encouraged “Orientals” to identify with American Sephardic ways, tethering moments of encounter with Americanness to the goals of the Sephardi Campaign.

Thus, the Sisterhood’s philanthropic efforts amongst Turkish Jews harkens back to the entanglement of the Sephardi Campaign and American colonial revival. Like the Sisterhood, various national chapters of the D.A.R. were involved in “Americanization” projects that sought to provide “patriotic education for immigrants,” promising that good American citizens could be “both made and born.”⁸² Analogous projects across the Sisterhood and chapters of the D.A.R. seeking to educate immigrants in Sephardicness, Americanness, or both called back to alliances forged between the two institutions at Chatham Square Cemetery. The comparison thus reinforces the reality that the Sephardi Campaign and American colonial revival of the early-to-mid twentieth century were not merely simultaneous movements, but also co-dependent efforts to promote the construction of Sephardic and American identities based in colonial pasts.

Gedalecia and others involved in the Federation, then, opposed not merely the term “Sephardic” and its ties to collective identity, but also its implicit ties to Americanness. In the 1910s, the Federation of Oriental Jews and Sisterhood of Shearith Israel butted heads over how to distribute and allocate resources to the immigrant community of the Lower East Side, vying for control over Turkish Jewish education and influence. In a notice on their correspondences with the Federation in April of 1914, the Sisterhood frustratedly reported:

“The Sisterhood has done considerable employment and relief work, giving much money and personal service for the welfare of the needy Oriental Jews. It has held celebrations on Purim, the Fourth of July and Succoth specially for the Oriental Jews. It has opened a free synagogue Downtown for the Oriental Jews, formed clubs in their midst and undertaken to conduct the Harlem Oriental Talmud Torah. All these activities have been

⁸² James R. Hill, “‘For the Children Out Here’: Re-creating the Gardens of Mount Vernon on the Bluffs of the Missouri River in Omaha, Nebraska,” in *Re-creating the American Past: Essays on the Colonial Revival*, ed. Richard Guy Wilson (University of Virginia Press, 2006), 292-293.

covertly or openly attacked, discredited and discouraged by & some of the leaders of the Federation who demand for themselves the government of those whom they term “their” people. These leaders...now demand that all funds of whatsoever nature destined for the needs of the Oriental Jews shall be handled, not by the existent institutions formed and supported to do specific communal service, but only by themselves.”⁸³

Evidently, the Sisterhood’s creation of Talmud Torahs, clubs, and “celebrations on Purim, the Fourth of July and Succoth specially for the Oriental Jews” pointed to their attempted ‘education’ of Ottoman Jews in both Sephardic and American ways. Yet the Federation stressed that the Turkish Jewish community ought to be governed by Turkish Jews themselves, open to resources and aid from the prosperous Sephardic congregation but autonomous to educate and support their own people as they saw fit. Pushback from the Federation of Oriental Jews thus challenged both the Sephardi Campaign and new forms of patriotic American Sephardicness.

In fact, Gedalecia and other Ottoman Jews often used the term “Oriental” to establish their own sense of Jewish mythology, independent and often in repudiation of American Sephardic myths of homeland in both medieval Spain and colonial America. As Aviva Ben-Ur has noted, this resulted in the development of a Sephardic “counter-myth,” whereby ‘Oriental’ Jews rejected the Sephardi Campaign’s goal to unify by stressing and spreading the “glories of Ottoman Jewish history” in place of the ‘mystique’ of the Spanish or American golden age.⁸⁴ For Gedalecia and others of the ‘Eastern’ diaspora, their sense of homeland, performed and/or conceived, seemed to exist unwaveringly in the former lands of the Ottoman Empire.

However, other members of the Ottoman Jewish community pioneered the Sephardi Campaign along with Shearith Israel and the Ladino Press. In 1915, Ben-Sion Behar, a Turkish Jew who wrote for the Press, published a letter in *La America* seeking to convince his fellow

⁸³ “[Report on] The President and Officers of the Federation of Oriental Jews in America,” April 23, 1914, manuscript, from the archives of Shearith Israel, Box: “Sisterhood - ‘Oriental’ Jews Corres. - 1912-1917.”

⁸⁴ Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History*, 131-132.

Ottoman Jews to embrace the merits of American Sephardic mythology. Behar told readers that Turkish Jews had merely lived as “guests” in the Ottoman Empire, as if coming to America and taking up Sephardicness was, at once, the equivalent of returning home to Spain and becoming inheritors of their long-lost American history. Behar wrote:

““With the word Sephardi, we can also praise all of America, North and South, considering that it is our Sephardim who were the first Jewish immigrants to America who took an active part in all of the revolutions and wars for the liberty of the American flag, as is written in detail in the history of the Jews in America. In North America the first Jewish cemetery was built in New York in the year 1645 by the Spanish-Portuguese congregation ‘Shearith Israel.’”⁸⁵

Behar emphasized Jewish involvement in the birth of American freedom and the undeniable record of Sephardic presence in North America, as evidenced by Shearith Israel’s “first Jewish cemetery” at Chatham Square. His letter resonated with Sephardic congregation’s patriotic rhetoric surrounding their burial grounds, a signal that Turkish Jews who adopted the term ‘Sephardic’ often took up the torch of patriot American homeland, too. As Devi Mays reminds us, understanding whether immigrant Jews like Behar who identified with the term ‘Sephardic’ did so out of truly conceived identification, sociopolitical strategy, or pure necessity—whether Sephardicness was conceived versus performed—is difficult to discern,⁸⁶ and should be a topic for continued investigation. What was clear: Members of the struggling Turkish Jewish community on New York’s Lower East Side needed support, and Shearith Israel had offered it to them in exchange for American Sephardicness, whether adopted in earnest or simply in pursuit of survival.

More broadly, Behar’s support for American Sephardicness reflected the lasting impacts of the Sephardi Campaign and colonial revival on later forms of Jewish memory. Looking back

⁸⁵ Ben-Sion Behar, “Sefaradim, ma no orientales,” *La Amerika*, October 29, 1915, trans. from Ladino by Devin E. Naar, in *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History*, 345-346.

⁸⁶ Mays, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora*, 8.

on the legacy of the Federation of Oriental Jews, Joseph M. Papo, a scholar and leader of the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America (an organization established around 1940, which in some ways had succeeded the Federation), wrote in the 1970s that the Federation was meant to “serve as a spokesman of the newly established Sephardic ‘colony’ toward the larger Jewish community.”⁸⁷ Whereas the Federation had framed its own community as an “Oriental Jewish colony,”⁸⁸ by the later years of the century, Papo and a myriad of other scholars conceived of the community as purely “Sephardic.”

Papo’s replacement of Ottoman Jewish histories with the umbrella of Sephardicness reinforces a central problem that this paper seeks to target, that the dynamic nature of the term ‘Sephardic’ has often resulted in intra-community erasures in history and historiography alike. In Papo’s case, the Sephardi Campaign had in fact shaped the way he understood and/or portrayed his own memory, as someone who had lived when the Federation was still quite active. By the mid-to-late twentieth century, the term “Oriental” along with fierce immigrant voices like Gedalecia’s had often faded out of view as Sephardicness prevailed in mainstream tellings of history. Aviva Ben-Ur points out, too, that “lay and scholarly accounts of American Jewish history” and media forms often “ignored” the import of “cross-ethnic interactions in the first half of the twentieth century,” proving that the Sephardi campaign had permeated not just Sephardic Jewish history, but also its historiography.⁸⁹

However, the spatial aspect of Beth Olam’s burial plot for “Oriental Jews” proves more difficult to bend than purely textual or literary source bases. The contentious Jewish stories that

⁸⁷ “A Short, Short History of the Federation of Oriental Jews of America, Inc.,” 1976, from the Center for Jewish History (NYC).

⁸⁸ A.J. Amateau, *Letter from A.J. Amateau to Congregation Shearith Israel*, February 18, 1913, letter, from the archives of Shearith Israel (Newark, NJ), Box: “Sisterhood - ‘Oriental’ Jews Corres. - 1912-1917.”

⁸⁹ Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History*, 185.

surrounded Plot Number 128 may have been edited out of written histories, but the physical space remains evidence of Jewish experiences of exclusion and empowerment, unification and separation, even among their own ‘brothers.’ In Beth Olam, the visual specter of “Oriental” Jewry etched into Sephardic space and burial archives has remained evidence of historical divisions that often otherwise go overlooked.

The “Oriental Jews” section points also to cross-city dynamics, such as the entanglement of the outer-borough plot itself with the Sisterhood’s settlement house on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Even more, Shearith Israel’s lack of Turkish burial distinctions in the earliest part of the century, creation and separation of Plot Number 128 in 1914, and eventual assertion that these “Oriental Jews” were Sephardic all along reminds us of the fluidity of Sephardicness at this time, and of cemeteries’ methodological value in mapping out the many layers of Sephardicness in a physical, permanent setting. In this sense, borders and histories constructed among ‘Sephardim’ in Beth Olam Cemetery have been ‘etched in stone’ and into city space.

The Jewish Burial Ground of Newport, Rhode Island: Ashkenazic Memories of Colonial Sephardic Space

In the late nineteenth century, as ruptures were beginning to emerge amongst Sephardic Jews in New York, an Ashkenazic congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, began practicing in the town’s old Sephardic synagogue. This synagogue had been established in the seventeenth century by a small community of Spanish and Portuguese Jews, many of whom were affiliated with Congregation Shearith Israel. At the time, Newport was known as an “oasis” for religious freedom, a place where Puritan Christians and Sephardic Jews mingled. Here, these Jews

established a burial ground and the now-famous synagogue which, in later years, would be renamed Touro Synagogue after the successful Sephardic Newport-based Touro family.⁹⁰

Today, Touro functions both as an active orthodox synagogue and a tourist destination, educating visitors about colonial Jewry and religious freedom in New England's history. But the congregation practicing at Touro is no longer Sephardic. In fact, by the 1850s, nearly all the Sephardic Jews of Newport had fled in the aftermath of the American Revolution, which decimated the city, and re-settled in other American cities like New York and Philadelphia.⁹¹

At the end of the nineteenth century, a growing community of Jews from Eastern Europe settled in Newport and, in 1893, formed the Ashkenazic congregation Jeshuat Israel. The congregation then began practicing in the old, inactive Sephardic synagogue and remained there throughout the twentieth century.⁹² This Ashkenazic occupation of Sephardic space, however, did not go unnoticed by Shearith Israel, which had taken in many of Newport's Jews after the American Revolution. The New York-based congregation had laid claim to the colonial synagogue decades earlier when its Sephardic congregants vacated, and in 1903 they made it clear that members of Jeshuat Israel would be allowed to lease the space for their religious activities but not perpetually reside or claim ownership there.⁹³

A report on November 13, 1916, reaffirmed this relationship in official congregational records: The Trustees of Shearith Israel defined the Newport congregation as "tenants" of the historic synagogue while Shearith Israel would serve as its "landlord." In the Trustees' meeting

⁹⁰ Michael Hoberman, *New Israel/New England: Jews and Puritans in Early America* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 3-5.

⁹¹ "History Bytes: Jewish Burials in Newport," Newport Historical Society, May 7, 2013, <https://newporthistory.org/history-bytes/>.

⁹² De Sola Pool, David. "The Touro Synagogue: Aspects of the Missing Half-century of its History," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, Vol. 38, No. 1, September 1948, 57-76; 60-61.

⁹³ "Touro Synagogue Owned by NYC Congregation," *Newport Daily News*, March 19, 2019. Newport Historical Society Archives.

minutes, they settled on an occupation fee of \$6, the contemporary equivalent of about \$200, which was to be paid monthly from Jeshuat Israel to the congregation in New York.⁹⁴

As two congregations negotiated terms of practice in Touro synagogue, establishing members of the Ashkenazic congregation as occupiers of Sephardic space but not as owners of it, Jeshuat Israel nevertheless began to stake a claim in colonial Jewish memories via the nearby burial ground, just one block away. Technically, Sephardic Jews in the colonial period had established this burial ground before Touro Synagogue as an independent site, but by the nineteenth century, most of those interred were members of the Sephardic congregation. As a result, the site has sometimes unofficially been called “Touro Cemetery.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jeshuat Israel began to hold memorial events at this cemetery. These events clearly revered the early Sephardic legacy and situated it within generalizable forms of American Jewishness; yet somewhat paradoxically, Jeshuat Israel also seemed to construct a patriot image at this cemetery that distanced mythical colonial Sephardicness from modern American Jewishness.

At the unveiling of a memorial tablet in the Jewish burial ground in 1908, Max Levy, then secretary and treasurer of Jeshuat Israel, gave a patriotic address to the congregation and town of Newport which wove colonial Jewry into the story of white settler colonialism. In contrast to contemporary historians, who often cast colonial Jews as merchants, travelers, and migrants, Levy called the Iberian Jewish settlers “colonists” who asserted their permanent presence in the town by purchasing land for their dead.⁹⁵ Loaded with notions of patriotism, whiteness, and more recently settler colonialism, Levy’s intermittent use of the term “colonist”

⁹⁴ “Report on the Condition of the Congregation of Touro Synagogue,” November 13, 1916, from the archives of Shearith Israel (Newark, NJ): *Meeting Minutes of the Board of Trustees*, 31.

⁹⁵ “In the Jewish Cemetery: Mr. Max Levy Gives Detailed Account of the Graves and Their Almost Illegible Epitaphs,” *Newport Daily News*, 1908, from the Newport Historical Society, Box 134B, folder 1.

in this address, and his insistence that the establishment of the cemetery sealed the community into historical permanence in Newport, allowed him to fold Jewish life not only into the story of American patriotism, but into the adjacent and now-contentious legacy of colonial settlement.

In the address, Levy went on to claim this history as his congregation's own while entrenching it firmly in the colonial American past. The burial ground, he said, was "sacred as the resting place of our illustrious forefathers, where the beautiful shrubs and flowered vines bend and bow under the breezes of heaven in reverence to the honored dead."⁹⁶ In this section, Levy framed the legacy of Sephardic Jews interred in Newport as part of Jeshuat Israel's own existence there. With the phrase "Our illustrious forefathers," he placed colonial Jewry within the bounds of broader Jewish American memory, mingling Jeshuat Israel's legacy with that of Sephardic congregants in Touro synagogue centuries earlier. In doing so, Levy also called back to the ideals of the Jewish colonial revival, suggesting that Ashkenazic immigrants were not making new homes for themselves in the twentieth century United States, but rather, renewing a sense of American homeland and Jewish continuity since colonial times. This stood in stark contrast to the reality of the congregation's situation. Whereas Jeshuat Israel was, formally, a "tenant" of Sephardic space in Newport, Max Levy had made a clear claim to the Sephardic legacy there.

However, Levy also used the historicity of this cemetery to chronicle two distinct periods of Jewish history in Newport: The Sephardic Jewish past—"forefathers" buried beneath the earth—and the evidently Ashkenazic Jewish present. Memorial Day commemoration ceremonies in the burial grounds of New York and Newport, comparatively, elucidate the distinction between the kinds of patriot Jewishness set out by Jeshuat Israel and Shearith Israel. At Jeshuat

⁹⁶ "In the Jewish Cemetery: Mr. Max Levy Gives Detailed Account of the Graves and Their Almost Illegible Epitaphs," *Newport Daily News*, 1908, from the Newport Historical Society, Box 134B, folder 1.

Israel's Memorial Day Service of 1897, congregants and town residents gathered at Newport's colonial Jewish burial ground to hear speeches by the Ashkenazic congregation and pay their respects to the monument-grave of Judah Touro, a Newport-born Sephardic Jew interred in the colonial burial ground in 1854 (one of the latest interments).

Speakers at the event memorialized Judah Touro by placing his patriotism into the context of the American Civil War, despite his death in 1854. Eugene Schreier, Jeshuat Israel's president, narrated how Touro, "born in the atmosphere of liberty" (the American Revolution), "inhaled the essence of true patriotism" and ultimately became a renowned philanthropist and soldier in the War of 1812. Schreier went on to emphasize Touro's legacy in constructing a broader memorial to the American Union, which promised to integrate Jews into modern Americanness. He declared, "Let us...raise our voice to God, in praise of the brave soldier whose undying devotion to his country, cemented the ties of the brotherhood of man. It can be truly said that the brave died not in vain. Are we not again a Union, one and inseparable?"⁹⁷

For Schreier, Jews were prolific in the teleology of American patriotism, which began with the Revolution and culminated with the Civil War. Even more, he stressed that Touro's patriotism had precluded the freedom that was to come for Jews with the establishment of the Union, a "brotherhood of man" where Jews could be full Americans. Schreier spoke little of colonial times or Revolution-era patriotism, implicitly citing the Sephardic legacy as part of the distant "atmosphere of liberty" that preceded America's far more climactic Civil War.⁹⁸ In this way, Schreier shifted the temporality of American Jewish patriotism and de-emphasized the

⁹⁷ "Memorial Day: Impressive Services at the Grave of Judah Touro," *Newport Herald*, June 1, 1897, Newport Historical Society Archives, unmarked folder.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

legacy of Sephardicness to reorient modern Ashkenazic Jewry as the loci of American Jewish history.

Whereas Shearith Israel's Memorial Day Pilgrimages had *resurrected* colonial Jewish pasts to reinforce its developing American Sephardic self-conception in the present, Schreier and Levy seemed intent on *historicizing* these pasts to promote a more generalizable, modern-era Jewish patriot image. Jeshuat Israel placed Civil War-era patriots, many of whom were Ashkenazim, at the center of Jewish history in contrast to the revered but archaic Sephardic Revolution-era patriots, thereby demonstrating that Ashkenazim of the Union were descendants of colonial patriotism but ultimately existed as new, modern American Jews.

In this way, the burial ground in Newport offered an opportunity for Ashkenazic reframing of Sephardic history through historic colonial space. Levy and Schreier alike portrayed colonial Sephardic communities as both generic "Jews" and as foundational but distant ancestors of the modernizing American Jewish patriot. The extension of colonial Sephardic experience to American Jewish experience more broadly, but simultaneous historicization of Sephardic history through cemetery space, seemed to allow members of Jeshuat Israel to feel nostalgic for colonial Jewry in North America while centralizing the contemporaneity of their Ashkenazic lives.

The nuances of this turn-of-the-century contestation over colonial Jewish memory, operating across the cemeteries of Shearith Israel in New York and Jeshuat Israel in Newport, may appear trivial in the broader scheme of American Sephardicness. Yet these contests held critical stakes for later conflicts over Sephardic space in the twenty-first century. In 2019, the *Newport Daily News* reported on an ongoing lawsuit between Shearith Israel and Jeshuat Israel over ownership of Touro synagogue. This dispute began in 2012 when the Newport congregation attempted to sell a pair of colonial-era *rimonim*, or "torah bells," to a Boston museum. Shearith

Israel retaliated with a lawsuit, fiercely claiming ownership of the synagogue and all its colonial-era properties and reminding Jeshuat Israel of its agreement to tenancy over a century earlier.⁹⁹

Even more complicated was the role of Newport’s Jewish cemetery in this legal case. In 2021, John Loeb, a man of Ashkenazic descent who served as an ambassador and major donor to Touro synagogue, established a gravestone for himself and his wife in the nearby colonial burial ground. The burial ground had been preserved as a historic site and closed to new burials since the 1850s, back when Judah Touro himself was interred there. Loeb’s addition to the Sephardic cemetery, ostensibly approved by Jeshuat Israel or affiliated tourist foundation at Touro Synagogue, reignited the force of Shearith Israel’s lawsuit, and new debates sprung up over claims to the burial site.¹⁰⁰

When I visited Newport for research in September 2024, I found the cemetery permanently locked, its invisibility on the block eerily reminiscent of Shearith Israel’s burial sites in Manhattan. Yet Newport’s Jewish burial ground was shuttered up for more dramatic reasons—this lawsuit remains ongoing. While Touro synagogue had records of lease and ownership in the archives of Shearith Israel, Newport’s Jewish burial ground became an even greater site of contemporary Jewish American controversy; no record has been found establishing legal ownership over it, and even today no one seems to know who the burial ground belongs to.

Popular news outlets have chronicled the fraught case between these two congregations in dramatic, if oversimplified, snapshots. But given the two congregations’ long, tense history of ideological and spatial struggle over American Jewish claims to colonial memory, the lawsuit’s

⁹⁹ “Touro Synagogue Owned by NYC Congregation,” *Newport Daily News*, March 19, 2019, Newport Historical Society Archives.

¹⁰⁰ “Rival Jewish congregations Feud over America’s Oldest Synagogue: A Historic Synagogue is at the Centre of a Power Struggle,” *The Economist*, February 12, 2022, <https://www.economist.com>.

implications clearly ran deeper than its theatrical exterior. The case laid bare critical historical distinctions between these Sephardic and Ashkenazic congregations' memories of the colonial American past, first formulated when Eastern European Jews came to practice in and commemorate Sephardic space at the turn of the century. Max Levy and Eugene Schreier had pushed forward narratives of American Jewish history in the Newport cemetery that centralized their contemporary presence, perhaps neglecting to account for the particularity of the site's Sephardic past and continued present.

On the one hand, leaders of the Ashkenazic congregation like Max Levy encouraged beneficial tourism of Sephardic spaces like the burial ground throughout the twentieth century, building memorial plaques and deciphering weathered graves. They harnessed memories of colonial Jewry through memorial services, claiming the story as their own and shifting it as they saw fit, but ultimately the community seemed to understand that there existed physical boundaries between themselves and the Sephardic spaces they occupied. However, Jeshuat Israel's sale of the colonial *rimonim* and Loeb's establishment of a burial plot in the colonial cemetery disrupted that physical boundary, perhaps reminding Shearith Israel of its commitment not merely to the American Jewish story at large, but also to the American Sephardic legacy.

Shearith Israel's Colonial Burial Grounds, Post-War: Forgivenness and Local Memories in a Time of Global Jewish Crisis

In this final section, I return to the story of Shearith Israel's burial grounds in New York in the period following the Second World War. As previous sections have demonstrated, throughout the twentieth century, tensions grew between American Sephardicness, other kinds of Jewishness, and shifting memories of the colonial past; in the later years of the century, these dynamics coalesced in a time of global Jewish crisis and existential anxiety. By the end of World War II, the Sephardi Campaign had spread through the United States, producing a strong but

sometimes troubled sense of unity amongst Jews who identified as Sephardic. At the same time, the Ashkenazic Jewish population continued to expand, and narratives of American Jewish history focused less on colonial pasts and more on the contemporary Ashkenazic present. Meanwhile, Shearith Israel's colonial burial grounds had fallen into a state of disarray.

In July of 1984, Jacob Kisner, a New Yorker born to Russian Jewish parents, visited Shearith Israel's 21st street cemetery with his wife, searching for the grave of a nineteenth-century Jewish scholar named Isaac Nordheimer. Kisner was not, however, able to locate the scholar's grave; instead, he found the historic burial ground overgrown with weeds and ridden with city litter. Immediately afterwards, Kisner wrote the congregation a frantic letter, describing "signs of what we (he and his wife) considered abandonment." According to Kisner, the cemetery was "strewn with litter, garbage, broken glass, etc."¹⁰¹

That same year, Kisner wrote a frustrated poem about the 21st Street cemetery called "Obsequies for Isaac Nordheimer," which the congregation packed away in the archives for me to find. In it, Kisner insisted that the cemetery and all its history had become vulnerable to the chaos of the modern world. His sentiment resonated with another letter to the congregation written by Roberta Halporn, a scholar of Jewish American cemeteries, who noted in 1988 that the "survival" of these cemeteries was "almost as much a miracle as the survival of their creators."¹⁰² Thus for Kisner and Halporn in this moment, destruction and decay in the 21st Street cemetery, even if only by the passive forces of time, neglect, and thoughtless New York litter, seemed to hold existential stakes for Jewish American history.

¹⁰¹ *Letter from Jacob Kisner to Shearith Israel*, July 1984, from the archives of Shearith Israel (NYC), folder: "Hist Cem."

¹⁰² *Letter from Roberta Halporn to Congregation Shearith Israel*, October 27, 1988, from the archives of Shearith Israel, folder: "21st St. Cem."

“Obsequies for Isaac Nordheimer,” by Jacob Kisner, 1984

Here lies	cold cold stiff against
Isaac --	His head-
forgotten --	stone --
Nordheimer,	
brilliant	a carpet of
Semitic	latter day
scholar &	Debris,
author;	uncollected litter
most celebrated	at his
19th century grammarian &	feet.
corpse,	20th century
too dead	dead letters for
to see the empty Bud-	I.N. &
weiser beer	his old old
can	Jewish
	friends. ¹⁰³

At the 21st Street cemetery, Kisner and his wife had also encountered a notorious character in Shearith Israel’s contemporary archive, the so-called “cat woman.” In his letter, Kisner wrote, “We ran into the person who you so aptly describe as the ‘cat woman,’ who in turn left dozens of cat food tins, refuse and other food on the outer cemetery wall.” The couple then confronted this “cat woman,” telling her that “it was wrong to leave refuse all over the front wall of the cemetery.” Kisner was shocked by her response, “a burst of anti-Semitic remarks and the statement that ‘If you like the place so much, why don’t you two go lie down in there.’”¹⁰⁴ The woman’s response must have reinforced fears of antisemitism that Kisner and his wife, as many other American Jews, faced after the Holocaust. At the same time, this unhoused “cat” woman’s use of cemetery space appeared symptomatic of broader issues surrounding public health, homelessness, and social inequity in the city in the 1980s, which had evidently permeated the cemetery.

¹⁰³ Jacob Kisner, “Obsequies for Isaac Nordheimer,” July 13, 1984, poem, Shearith Israel, folder: “Hist Cem.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

As American Historian Jay Winter stipulates, sites of memory can seemingly “vanish” when they are not needed to reinforce narratives of contemporary life. “Most of the time,” he writes, “sites of memory live through their life cycle and, like the rest of us, inevitably fade away.” Most often, this is because the sites “arise out of the needs of groups of people to link their lives with salient events in the past,” and when “that need vanishes, so does the glue that holds together the social practice of commemoration.” As a result, Winter argues, “collective memories diminish and sites of memory decompose or simply fade into the landscape.”¹⁰⁵

By the latter half of the 1980s, the 21st Street cemetery had not only faded but become a “real problem” for the congregation and city alike.¹⁰⁶ Calling back to Winter, Shearith Israel’s cemeteries seemed to be “decomposing,” literally and symbolically.¹⁰⁷ In a grounds report of July 1989, a Trustee of Shearith Israel described the overgrown appearance of Shearith Israel’s 21st Street cemetery, clearly neglected by the congregation, and the continued presence of unhoused people, including who he called “our infamous ‘Cat Lady.’” Whereas living generations of those interred in Beth Olam kept the congregation’s fourth cemetery maintained, the Trustee stressed that Shearith Israel had to take responsibility for the historic cemeteries’ preservation, since “most if not all the families [are] no longer extant.”¹⁰⁸ In February of that year, the chairperson of the West 11th Street Block Association wrote, too, that accumulations of graffiti, ice, and other damage in the 11th Street cemetery provided an “open invitation for abuse.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Jay Winter, “Sites of Memory,” in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (Fordham University Press, 2010), 324.

¹⁰⁶ *Report on Historic Cemeteries*, July 6, 1989, official report, from the archives of Shearith Israel, folder: “Grant HC [Historic Cemetery].”

¹⁰⁷ Winter, “Sites of Memory,” 324.

¹⁰⁸ *Report on Historic Cemeteries*, 1989, from the archives of Shearith Israel.

¹⁰⁹ *Letter from William F. Cox to Congregation Shearith Israel*, February 1989, letter, from the archives of Shearith Israel, folder: “Hist Cem.”

Complaint letters and reports of the time were particularly attuned to the threat of cemetery “abuse” since 1985, when an act of vandalism destroyed parts of the burial ground at Chatham Square. That July, a man named Jesus Fuentes Richmore Von Max had broken into the cemetery with a pick and shovel: “Jumping the wrought-iron fence,” the *New York Times* reported a day later, he “plunged his pick into seven sarcophagi.” When asked, Von Max told police that he had come to the “Historic Jewish cemetery” to “look for his mother.”¹¹⁰ Days later, the *Daily News* ran the headline, “Police Subdue Grave-wrecker,” describing Von Max as a “deranged man” and printing images of police picking up the pieces of destroyed Jewish tombstones and putting them back in place.¹¹¹



“Emergency service police replace headstones at graves in vandalized cemetery.”¹¹²

In the days immediately following, the synagogue discussed the best way to move forward, distressed by the “abuse” and “desecration” wrought by Von Max and how the situation

¹¹⁰ “Vagrant Held in Vandalism of Historic Jewish Cemetery,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1985, from the archives of Shearith Israel and *NY Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/19/nyregion/vagrant-held-in-vandalism-of-historic-jewish-cemetery.html>

¹¹¹ “Police Subdue Grave-wrecker,” *Daily News*, Manhattan, July 19, 1985, from the archives of Shearith Israel, folder: “Chatham Sq. 7/85.”

¹¹² “Police Subdue Grave-wrecker,” *Daily News*, Manhattan, July 19, 1985, from the archives of Shearith Israel, folder: “Chatham Sq. 7/85.”

was to be remedied.¹¹³ Shearith Israel's deliberations, city newspaper articles, and letters from New Yorkers all used terms like "destruction," "abuse," and "desecration," while also emphasizing the impossibility of the cemeteries' apparent survival. This language suggests that for New York Jews, these sites' destruction due to time, neglect, and break-ins by outsiders served as a local manifestation of space destroyed abroad in the Shoah; catastrophe in these cemeteries became somewhat analogous to the loss of Jewish space transnationally.

Responses to cemetery neglect, decay, and vandalism also vaguely romanticized the sites' vulnerability to the modern city and abuse by New York's 'villains.' Kisner, Halporn, and Shearith Israel all stressed these cemeteries' susceptibility to "abuse," calling back to the congregation's commemorations of the cemeteries in the first part of the twentieth century. In particular, in the early twentieth century the congregation had produced mythologies surrounding the cemeteries' "abuse" by British soldiers during the American Revolutionary War (for example, that British soldiers shot patriots against the cemetery wall), thereby coding the burial grounds as patriot sites;¹¹⁴ similarly, Kisner and Halporn emphasized these cemeteries' vulnerability to the wrath of New York City's projected villains—ostensibly, poor, mentally compromised, and/or unhoused city dwellers—aligning the sites with forms of elite urban Americanness in the later twentieth century. Active police presence at the cemeteries only reinforced their association with wealthy, white-coded city life and politics.

Parallel conceptions of Shearith Israel's vulnerable but elite colonial cemeteries between the early and late twentieth centuries prompt a consideration, too, of the sites' Sephardicness in the postwar period. In 1983, Elise Hagouel Langsam, a Sephardic Jew and resident of

¹¹³ *Correspondences of the Synagogue Board on Repairs to Chatham Square*, 1985, manuscripts, Shearith Israel (NYC), folder: "Chatham Sq. 7/85."

¹¹⁴ See David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone: Early Jewish Settlers, 1682-1831*.

Manhattan's Lower West Side, wrote a letter to Shearith Israel expressing worries that neglect of the congregation's New York cemeteries had consequences for the state of Sephardicness on a global scale. Langsam wrote: "As a Sephardic Jew and a concerned citizen, I am appalled at the despicable condition of the Spanish Portuguese Jewish cemetery on West 21st street." The congregation's lack of cemetery maintenance, she wrote, was a "disgrace not only for the Sephardic community, which prides itself on the maintenance and perpetuation of traditional values, but for all Jews and religious groups throughout the world."¹¹⁵ For Langsam, the integrity of both traditional Sephardicness and global Jewishness were at stake as Shearith Israel's cemeteries decayed.

Around this time, Octavio Armand published the poem "Segundo Cementerio" in a popular New York brochure called *Sites: A Bimonthly Series on Buildings, Places and Monuments*.¹¹⁶ The poem's despairing tone seems resonant of Jacob Kisner, but Armand used the cemetery's forgottenness to emphasize the global nature of Sephardic rather than generally Jewish memory. Armand conjured an image of the Sephardic diaspora defined by its "strange...foreign" language (Ladino, presumably) and roots in Toledo, Lisbon, Jerusalem, and New York. Armand must have drawn on his own experience of the Cuban diaspora to construct this map of Sephardicness, situated in the hyper-local context of the West 11th Street cemetery yet utterly defined by its transnational European past. Evidently, he also neglected to include Turkey, Syria, or other lands of the former Ottoman Empire.

¹¹⁵ Letter from Elise Hagouel Langsam to Joseph A. Tirica of Shearith Israel, January 15, 1983, Shearith Israel (NYC), folder: "Historic Cemeteries."

¹¹⁶ Octavio Armand, "Segundo Cementerio," in *Sites: A Bimonthly series on buildings, places and monuments*, 1980, Shearith Israel.

“Segundo Cementerio,” original in Spanish by Octavio Armand, translated by Carol Maier, circa 1970-80

1.
Eleventh between Fifth and Sixth.
A small triangle outlined in shadows.
Names in Spanish, Portuguese. Illegible.
A few dates dragged through time.
Old dust of old Jews. And marble. And grass.
Five or six graves for recounting death.

2.
They must have stopped dying a century ago.
Must have been silent so long they wore out their
names
and their faith in the name.
They will no longer hollow out words letter by
letter.
They linger into the night, pieces of evening.
And the wind, still, in their bones.
They will no longer ask, Why are we alive?
And the roots that touch them without making a
sound.
They spoke a strange language and their silence
is even more foreign.
And tongues that became clumps of mud
in museums, handfuls of holy land in Jerusalem,
in Toledo, in Manhattan, in Lisbon.
Dead in a dead cemetery.
They’re here and no one knows.¹¹⁷

Armand and Langsam’s late twentieth-century theorizations about the disarray of Shearith Israel’s cemeteries point to the emergence of a new ‘Sephardi mystique’ based in postwar diaspora ideologies. In the years following the Shoah, Sephardic Jews in the United States became especially focused on “survival myths,” conceiving of the Inquisition and Holocaust as foundational and converging pillars of their diasporic trauma, hardship, and survival.¹¹⁸ Langsam and Armand, too, seemed to understand the violent decay of Shearith Israel’s colonial cemeteries as adjacent to these other two pillars of postwar Sephardic survival mythology, Inquisition and Holocaust.

¹¹⁷ Octavio Armand, “Segundo Cementerio,” in *Sites: A Bimonthly series on buildings, places and monuments*, 1980, Shearith Israel.

¹¹⁸ Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History*, 185-187.

This kind of American Sephardic remembrance simultaneously reinforced the prewar ‘Sephardi mystique,’ discussed in previous sections, and rearranged earlier memories to reckon with the necessity of globalized Jewish identity. Like earlier conceptions of the mystique, Armand and Langsam tethered the origins of Sephardicness to both early Iberia and America—to the old and new worlds at once. This mystique could traverse national borders, retaining the particularity of Sephardic history while centralizing global pasts in Iberia, New York, and Jerusalem. Yet unlike the Sephardi Campaign of the interwar period and mid-century, which privileged identification with the colonial-era ‘new world’ over the ‘old world,’ conceptions of Sephardic identity in the later part of the century maintained an intense nostalgia for old world Iberia in asserting a contemporary sense of belonging abroad. These newer notions of American Sephardicness did not engage in colonial revivalism, departed from former mythologies of the Jewish patriot, and claimed an increasingly generalized sense of global Jewishness even as it clung to the Iberian past.

Unsurprisingly, these calls to transnationality came on the heels of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and exponentially growing force of Zionism amongst Jews of the United States. These shifting attunements in spatial memory, particularly from local to global, may help explain Shearith Israel’s seeming negligence when it came to maintaining its burial grounds, which had caused much frustration amongst Jewish New Yorkers. While Halporn, Kisner, Armand, and Langsam each conjured transnational contexts for Shearith Israel’s Manhattan cemeteries, they also approached the sites as *real* places in the contemporary city that deserved respectable local lives and afterlives. Kisner and Halporn had reminded the congregation that diaspora Jews in New York felt increasingly dislocated from their sense of

belonging in America, wanting these local Jewish cemeteries to serve as memorials to their city history but finding them in a state of neglect.

Perhaps, new commitments to Zionist projects and restoration of destroyed Sephardic and/or Jewish spaces in Europe took up time and funding that otherwise might have been dedicated to these local sites. At the same time, it seemed that funding from outside organizations such as the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society had ceased since the early part of the century. Too, the chaos of New York in the '80s posed practical challenges to the congregation's preservation initiatives, especially since the sites had become "forgotten" space in Manhattan.

Evidently, for New Yorkers, Shearith Israel's colonial cemeteries stimulated remembrance surrounding the Holocaust but also laid bare tensions between local and global forms of Jewish memory in the United States. The New Yorkers' refusal to allow these cemeteries to fade into forgottenness provided them with a local way of mourning the destruction of Jewish space abroad in the wake of the Shoah, but it also allowed them to defend their very particular (sometimes elitist) and equally vulnerable city and neighborhood-based senses of home in New York, even as narratives of global Jewish homeland coursed through the United States.

Conclusions

When I recently visited Shearith Israel's 11th Street cemetery, I imagined the letter Jacob Kisner might have written about the state of it. The site housed rat traps, overgrown weeds, and crumbling gravestones; I got odd looks from New Yorkers zipping by, wondering what could possibly be worth stopping to investigate. Just before leaving, though, I noticed tiny stones placed all along the cemetery's locked gate and surrounding fence. Placing stones is a common

memorial practice amongst Jews marking graves—but it is not usually used to mark fences. Likely, whoever placed these stones had come to commemorate the old graves but found the burial site locked. Could it have been a distant relative of someone interred in the cemetery? A tour group? Or, perhaps, the stones belonged to another history student searching for some remnant of old Jewish life in their city.

In any case, when the stone-placer found the West 11th Street cemetery’s gate locked, they did not cast aside their stones. With a small act, they memorialized the site’s simultaneous historicity, sacredness, and forgottenness; the little stones on the fence pulled Shearith Israel’s burial ground into contemporary history by pointing not merely to the cemetery’s establishment, like official stone monuments often do, but also to the cemetery’s continued *life*. These commemorative stones tell us that while old Sephardic cemeteries might “vanish”¹¹⁹ in dominant public and academic discourses, they continue to live in smaller, more localized ways. These sites cannot, as Winter suggests, be simply forgotten.



*Stones placed along the fence at Shearith Israel’s West 11th Street Cemetery.*¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Winter, “Sites of Memory,” 324.

¹²⁰ Original photograph by Talia Fader Idelson, November 2024.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, early Sephardic cemeteries in the United States have led lives simultaneously “etched in stone”¹²¹ and “outlined in shadows,”¹²² dramatically permanent in their urban settings but relegated to the shadows of contemporary city space. Still, localized and community-oriented forms of commemoration, like poems from New Yorkers, stones along fences, and even angry letters, have been successful in bringing these cemeteries out of the “shadows.” Even more, it is precisely these burial sites’ paradoxically dynamic yet fixed existences which make them unique intersection points for Jewish self-conception and remembrance, history and historiography.

In this thesis I have traced the lives of these sites through the twentieth century to insist that studying Sephardic cemeteries is a fruitful and utterly necessary way to analyze shifting conceptions of American Jewishness in urban contexts. As seen in New York and Newport, these cemeteries became arenas for inter and intra-Sephardic conflict and self-definition, but also spaces for camaraderie, mixture, and commemoration. The sites also prompt methodological attunement to moments of unexpected spatial intersection in Jewish cities. For example, in the early twentieth century, New York’s Lower East Side was home simultaneously to the then-thriving colonial Chatham Square burial ground and a myriad of immigrant spaces, including Shearith Israel’s contested Orchard Street settlement house where many of the city’s ‘Oriental’ Jews resided. While Beth Olam Cemetery and Shearith Israel’s colonial burial grounds may appear detached from one another across time and city space, the sites’ twentieth century lives demonstrate that their histories are, in fact, inseparable.

At the beginning of the century, Sephardic cemeteries in New York and Newport became loci of Jewish claims to American homeland and patriotism. At other moments, the

¹²¹ A reference to David de Sola Pool’s book, *Portraits Etched in Stone*.

¹²² Octavio Armand, “Segundo Cementerio.”

Sephardicness of these sites faded away as Ashkenazic communities constructed new notions of American Jewishness. Then, at the close of the century, New Yorkers harnessed the history and disarrayed afterlives of Shearith Israel's burial grounds to reckon with their own memories in increasingly globalized contexts. Changes in American Jewish memory molded the lives of these Sephardic cemeteries, and in turn, these cemeteries shaped American Jewish self-conceptions.

In an interview, Devi Mays contended that scholars of Sephardicness often deal with historical subjects who molded their identities in moments of necessity, not often conceiving of themselves as historical subjects. She said, ““These are not people who are thinking about ‘Who am I? What does it mean to be Sephardic? What does it mean to be Ottoman?’”¹²³ But these cemeteries both arose from necessity in the colonial period and, in the later part of their lives, pushed American Jewish communities of the twentieth century to reflect consciously on their identities, conceived and performed, and to conceptualize themselves by reckoning with their pasts.

Sephardic burial sites thus led lives that were dynamic and at times inconsistent but never random. In literature, space, and burial records alike, thematic patterns emerge that connect moments across the twentieth century: Claims to (or rejections of) American patriotism and belonging, encounters with the Jewish ‘other,’ necessities of Jewish unification and distinction, and fears of destruction and forgottenness in Jewish spaces, local and global. In each of these cases, Jews reckoned not merely with their own memories but also with shifting constructions of American class and race politics. Particularly in contexts of the Sephardi Campaign, colonial revival, and rural cemetery movement, Jewish claims to American belonging often involved

¹²³ Chris Gratien and Sam Negri, “Narrating Sephardic Histories: A Reflection,” in *Sephardic Trajectories: Archives, Objects, and the Ottoman Jewish Past in the United States*, ed. Kerem Tınaz and Oscar Aguirre-Mandujano (Koç University Press, 2020), 183.

concurrent claims to eliteness and whiteness, identification as settlers rather than as immigrants. Therefore, through a study of cemeteries this project has explored both marginal and dominant memories, pointing to the ways in which American Jews have renegotiated those categories in seeking prosperity, belonging, and survival in the United States.

In following the lives of these cemeteries, I have sought to complicate the trajectory of American Jewish memory at large, centering the often-sidelined stories of Sephardic communities and memorial spaces in the United States. I am optimistic that gaps opened by this project may prompt further research into lesser-known Sephardic cemeteries; this paper relied heavily on the abundant yet bounded archives of Shearith Israel, and I wonder how materials from exclusively Ottoman-Jewish cemeteries in the United States, for instance, might complicate my conclusions. Last, I earnestly hope that Jewish cemeteries of the United States, known and unknown, continue to be studied by historians but above all *noticed* by passersby. As Jay Winter writes, “Sites of memory vanish, to be sure, but they can be conjured up again when people decide once again to mark the moment they commemorate.”¹²⁴ Let us, then, decide to mark sites at the margins of American Jewish history, refusing to let untold stories and spaces fade away like old graves overgrown with lichen.

¹²⁴ Winter, “Sites of Memory,” 324.

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