

The Founding and Restoration of Canada's Oldest Surviving Synagogue: A Different Jewish History

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Résumé

En juin, la plus vieille synagogue du Canada a célébré son 120^{ème} anniversaire. Cette occasion fut soulignée par une cérémonie parrainée par le gouvernement du Canada qui désigna cette Synagogue comme étant un site "d'une importance nationale tant au plan historique qu'architectural." La quatrième Synagogue fondée au sein de la nation canadienne, la Congrégation Emanu-El se trouve à Victoria, C.B., petite ville sur une île, au large de la Côte ouest du Canada.

L'histoire des débuts de cette plus vieille synagogue du Canada est des plus remarquables. Nul Juif ne peut échapper à son passé fait de persécutions de souffrances et de tragédies. Cependant, un fait est à noter: Le Nouveau Monde offrit un modèle de société différente tissée d'espoir en matière de rapports entre les groupes ethniques et religieux. L'engagement, en Amérique du Nord, envers des normes libérales et une société ouverte a abouti en une tolérance pour les minorités qui leur a permis de se développer librement. Parfois, notre pluralisme démocratique a même engendré une sympathie véritable et un vrai sentiment de fraternité. Aucune partie de l'histoire du Canada n'illustre mieux ceci que celle des premiers jours de la colonisation dans une colonie à l'état d'embryon de l'Ile de Vancouver et, il n'est pas d'événement qui puisse mieux le montrer si ce n'est la fondation d'une synagogue dans cette communauté de pionniers Juifs.

In June 1983, Canada's oldest surviving synagogue celebrated its 120th year of existence. It marked the occasion with a ceremony sponsored by the

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Canadian Government designating the synagogue a site “of national historic and architectural significance.” The fourth Jewish congregation to be founded in what was to become, in a few short years, the Canadian nation, Congregation Emanu-El is situated in Victoria, British Columbia, a small city on an island off the West Coast of Canada.

That Canada’s oldest synagogue should be located in the westernmost tip of the country is unusual but the story of its beginnings is even more remarkable. All of us are only too aware how much of Jewish history of these last 2000 years of life in a European Christian civilization is characterized by persecution, suffering and often tragedy. No Jew, regardless of how remote he may be from his people or traditions, can escape from that past, nor from the accompanying sense of vulnerability. Yet the New World has offered a different more hopeful model for relationships between ethnic and religious groups. The commitment in North America to liberal norms and an open society has resulted in a tolerance for minorities that has allowed them to develop freely. Sometimes our democratic pluralism has even produced a genuine congeniality and true feeling of brotherhood. No part of Canadian history exemplifies this more than the early days of settlement in the embryonic colony of Vancouver Island and no event demonstrates it better than the founding of a synagogue in this pioneer community.

The first Jews arrived in Victoria in 1858, attracted by the Fraser River gold rush on the mainland. Proof indeed that we truly are a wandering tribe, most came from the United States and England, a few from Germany and some from as far away as Australia. The port of Victoria in the Colony of Vancouver Island quickly became the principal urban centre and jumping-off point for the rush. Here a considerable number decided to stay.

Within a few years after the first arrivals, there were perhaps one hundred Jewish souls in Fort Victoria. With customary religious loyalty, as soon as a *minyan* could be gathered, the first Jews had held High Holy Day services in a private house in the fall of 1858.

Soon a Jewish Cemetery had been founded and a Benevolent Society formed and in 1862 a Congregation was formally established. “Whereas, according to the holy ordinances of the House of Israel, it is highly necessary to adhere to the religion thereof, and to attend to the dying and burying of the dead, and whereas the Israelites of Victoria, B.C. are desirous to fulfil the ordinances of our venerated and holy religion, which has been continuously handed down to us by our forefathers, therefore we hereby unite and form ourselves into a Congregation this fifth day of Ellul and the year 5622, corresponding with the 31st day of August, 1862.”

With a congregation organized, it was quickly decided to erect a synagogue. A campaign for a building fund was launched enabling the congregation to purchase a piece of land that year “suitable in all respects for \$730.00.” For help in erecting a synagogue, appeal was made to their local Jewish brethren, to their adopted wider community of Victoria and to their co-religionists in San Francisco from whence many had originally come.

The list of contributions to the fund with the names of contributors and the amount they pledged has been preserved to this day along with many documents from this period. Examining the list one finds the names of all those early Jewish pioneers. But what is surprising is the large number of non-Jews who made substantial contributions as well. But the most dramatic testimony to the spirit of fellow-feeling and harmony that existed in that pioneer society was the cornerstone-laying ceremony held on June 2, 1863.

It was a gala day for the city incorporated just a year earlier. The whole town turned out to see the procession, led by a band from the H.M.S. Topaze, a British Warship in Esquimalt Harbour. All the ethnic societies of the day — the French Benevolent Society, the German Choral Society and the St. Andrew’s Society — participated with the congregation in a march through the raw new town to the Masonic temple. Here 70 Masons from The Fraternity of Ancient and Honorable Order of Freemasons joined them. The procession grew larger and larger as each complement swung into line as they marched to the Synagogue site.

Special songs were sung, prayers were uttered and speeches made. S. Hoffman, Vice-President of the congregation, addressed the assemblage at length, pointing up with pride that the scattered tribe of Israel even “in this isolated part of the globe — have each and all striven manfully to uphold that religion which has been handed down to us by our forefathers.” The Masons performed their customary ritual, laying the cornerstone “in due and ancient form.” A copper box containing different items was placed in one cornerstone by the Congregation while the Masons made their deposit of a vellum scroll in a hermetically sealed bottle in a separate cornerstone. The Congregation bought 50 cigars for \$5.00 from a local tobacconist to be distributed to the band in gratitude for the stirring music provided by its members for the occasion. The newly elected first Mayor of Victoria and the Chief Justice of the Colony participated in the ceremony and by all accounts it was a remarkable day in the life of early British Columbia.

Surely, few synagogues in these last two thousand years of life in the diaspora have begun under such auspicious circumstances and with such widespread participation and support. The raising of funds and the dedication

of the synagogue had very much been a community affair. Rather than separating people, religion and ethnicity had brought them together. Instead of dividing society, the founding and building of a denominational House of Worship had been the occasion for an unusual display of harmony and fellowship. *The British Colonist*, the newspaper of the day, devoted almost two full columns to an account of the ceremony, concluding: "Thus terminated an eventful day in the history of the Jews on Vancouver Island, and it must be a source of infinite gratification to that body, that the ceremonies of the day were participated in by all classes of our community with a hearty goodwill and brotherly feeling evidencing the high esteem in which they are held by fellow townsmen of the City of Victoria."

Although the numbers of that early Jewish community never exceeded more than perhaps two hundred, they had built their synagogue to hold nearly two times that many congregants. In what had been a wilderness a few short years before, the Jews of Victoria had erected a synagogue. Not only were they existing on the fringes of civilization, but in so far as the major Jewish centres were concerned, they had stepped off the edge of the world. In the wonderful flowery language of the day, the Vice President of the congregation acknowledged this with some wonderment mixed with pride: "Who would not have ridiculed the idea that where, ere now, nought but the hunter's step and wild beasts' roar ever disturbed the wilderness, should, at this early day, be erected a Synagogue by the scattered tribes of Israel?"

These early pioneers constituted a remarkable group of men and women. Their accomplishments can be compared favourably with the talents and achievements of any similar pioneer Jewish community in North America. Proud of their own religious and cultural identity, they also actively contributed to the business, cultural and political life of the Colony. From their ranks were drawn the third Jew to be elected to a legislature in British North America (Selim Franklin in 1860), the first Jew to be elected Mayor in British North America (Lumley Franklin who became Victoria's second Mayor in 1866) and the first Jew to be sent to sit in the Canadian House of Commons (Henry Nathan, Jr. elected from Victoria in 1871 immediately after Confederation). None of this would have been possible, of course, if there had not been an easy acceptance and general congeniality in this early settlement society.

However, the hope that Victoria would become a place where many Jews would come and flourish was never realized. With the completion of the building of the railway across Canada in 1885, Victoria witnessed the shift of much of the Province's commerce and future growth to the new mainland city of Vancouver. Victoria generally entered a long period of stagnation and the

Jewish community, in particular, began a century long decline. For much of this period there were only a few dozen Jewish families and sometimes less. Often to form a *minyan* was a formidable undertaking.

In 1948, it was decided to “modernize” the synagogue: the original brick structure including virtually all windows were covered with stucco. The handsome massive wooden doors were removed and subsequently disappeared. In the interior, a false ceiling was dropped into place obliterating and destroying the traditional gallery. A seven-foot skylight at the centre of the vaulted ceiling was taken out, capped with boards and it too disappeared.

Yet, despite its small numbers and difficult circumstances, the Jewish community of Victoria continuously maintained its synagogue as a House of Worship well into the second century. It is presently Canada’s oldest surviving synagogue, as well as the oldest one on the West coast of North America and the oldest House of Worship of any denomination in continuous use in British Columbia.

In 1978, a few members of the Jewish community in Victoria resolved that the time had come to restore its unique historical building to the original character and beauty of 1863. Despite tiny numbers (the synagogue counted less than one hundred memberships), despite the absence of tycoons of industry or captains of commerce in its midst, despite the worry that a project of such magnitude seemed well beyond its human and financial resources, the congregation unanimously approved the project. “The Committee to Restore Canada’s Oldest Surviving Synagogue” was born. Yet all of us knew that the Committee had taken on an immense project and that the chances of failure were greater than the likelihood of success. Where were we to find the estimated quarter of a million dollars to pay for it? Our mandate from the congregation required that we raise the money through voluntary contributions, not through any kind of special levy upon our annual dues; and that we proceed only as the monies were raised. As well the complexity and difficulty of restoring a building now into its second century were daunting.

None of us knew anything about raising money or, with the exception of one individual, anything about restoring old buildings. Some of the Committee regularly attended *shul*, others only infrequently, one wasn’t even a member of the Congregation. Yet all were determined to succeed in our undertaking.

This is not the appropriate forum for an account of that arcane enterprise called fund-raising pursued with such diligence and raised to such an high art by North American Jewish communities. For Victoria the restoration was by far the largest fund-raising effort ever undertaken. Occasionally we were left near bitter tears at the mean-spirited response to our appeal. Sometimes we were

provoked to uproarious laughter at the unpredictable and bizarre behaviour of people when asked to part with their money. Frequently, we were deeply touched and jubilant at the generosity of the human spirit.

The B.C. Heritage Trust awarded a grant of \$50,000, the largest single grant given by that body to that time. It subsequently provided two supplementary grants of \$25,000 and \$7,000 respectively. The Bronfman Foundation made two grants of \$10,000 each. Members of the Vancouver Jewish community contributed some \$30,000. The City of Victoria provided a special decorative sidewalk around the synagogue plus a \$5,000 grant. Many ordinary citizens from every walk of life responding to appeals for assistance provided countless donations from one dollar to one thousand dollars.

The response of the Christian community to the widely publicized restoration effort was fascinating. The Evangelicals initiated contacts, wrote large cheques and urged us to keep Judea and Samaria forever. Liberal Protestants invited us to give polite lectures, were thrilled at the ecumenical origins of the Synagogue and made small donations.

Yet with all the assistance from elsewhere, the bulk of the money had to be found within the local Jewish community of Victoria. *Every single* member of the community contributed to the restoration at least once, many twice and a few three times. Of the ultimate cost of \$370,000 of the project over half was raised in the Victoria Jewish community, the largest amount ever raised in the community, and a startling sum when one considers that only a few years earlier the whole annual budget of the Synagogue was some \$20,000.

The challenge of restoring a 119 year-old building proved to be even more formidable than finding the funds to pay for it. Removing the stucco and restoring the original brick facade, the handsome windows and the massive central doors underneath constituted the project's first phase. Removing the false ceiling from the interior and re-creating the traditional gallery, restoring the Ark and replacing the seven foot skylight were part of the second phase of work. Yet neither description of the above conveys the complexity and difficulty of the task: to make fancy shaped bricks no longer manufactured, to re-create doors no longer made anywhere, to ship stained glass from Europe, to re-make three hundred elaborate spindles for the gallery railing, to find plasterers expert at restoration, to curve bannisters in a particularly complicated fashion, to restore a Rose window that couldn't be removed from the wall, to find a maker of pews who could duplicate those of 119 years ago — the list of seemingly impossible challenges to the Restoration Committee and its Provincial Heritage Consultants could be multiplied indefinitely. Yet through the two years of reconstruction work, the foremost goal was to achieve a result

that was as faithful and authentic as possible.

Testimony to the success of the Restoration Committee's endeavours was not long in coming. Within a year of the project's completion, the synagogue was given three prestigious heritage awards: a local Victoria award, a Canadian award, and a North American award.

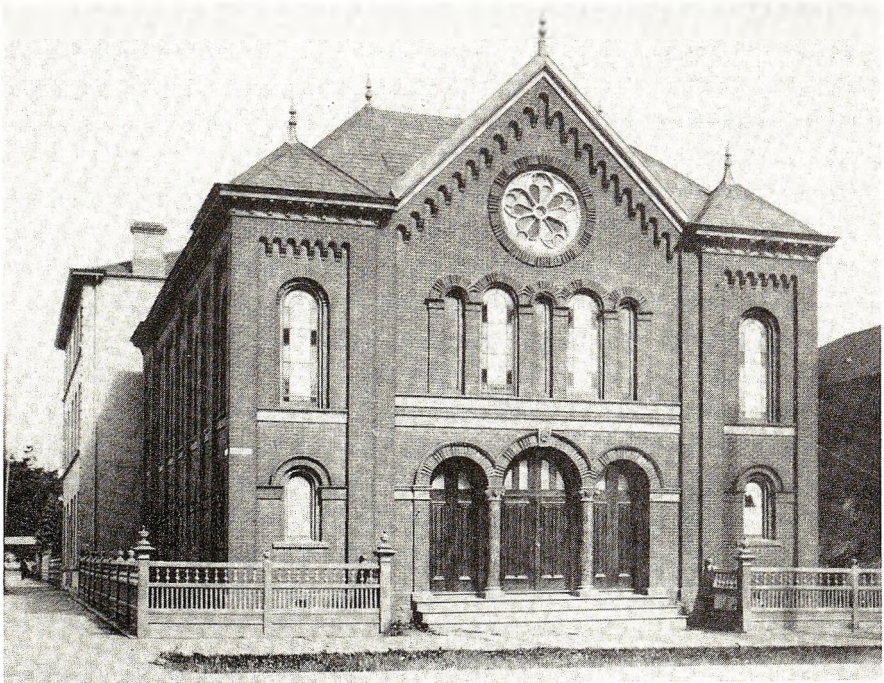
For all who worked on the restoration of our House of Worship, it was never a matter of dollars and cents or of bricks and mortar, although we spent countless hours and seemingly innumerable meetings dealing with these practical questions. It was a matter of keeping faith with our founders who had built so well and for the future of Jewish life on the West Coast over a century ago. It was a question of recreating the beauty and harmony of the sanctuary envisaged by our pioneers. It was also a way of contributing to the special historical character of our city that has taken particular pains to preserve its past and its heritage buildings. Perhaps at the deepest level of our Jewish psyche, having survived as a people against all odds for 4000 years, the restoration of our ancient synagogue was a way of asserting that we are still capable of undertaking the improbable and succeeding despite the forces arrayed against us.

In June 1982, the completion of the restoration of the synagogue was celebrated with the re-enactment of the events of June 1862. Once again the whole town of Victoria turned out to commemorate the occasion and City and Provincial dignitaries, the ethnic societies, the Masonic Order — all celebrated what our forefathers had achieved in common 119 years earlier. In June 1983, the Canadian Government sponsored a new ceremony on the 120th anniversary of the founding of the synagogue to officially designate it a national historic site.

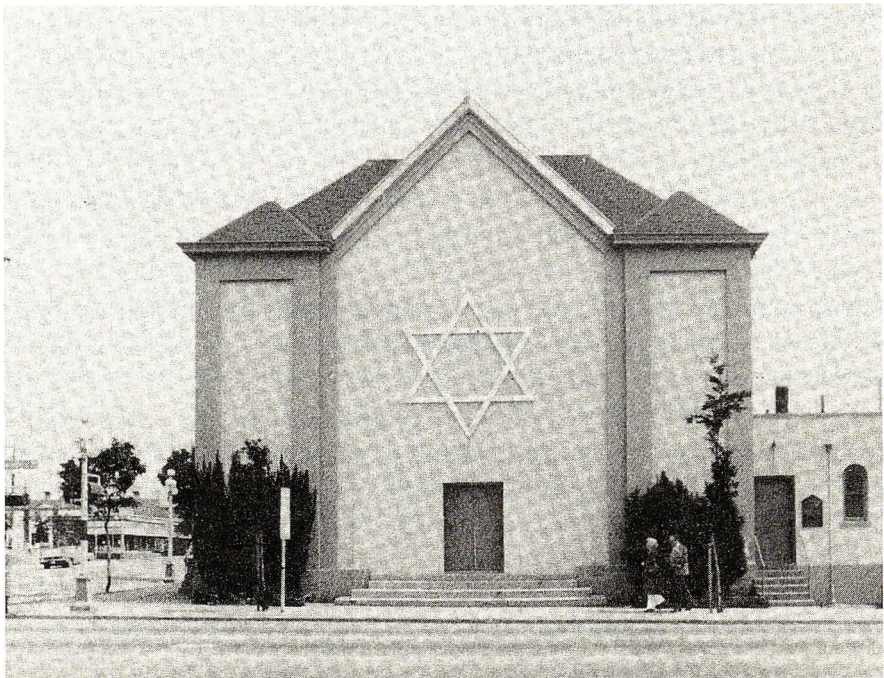
Perhaps the remarkable story of Canada's oldest surviving synagogue provides evidence that the sad and tragic history of Jews living in a gentile society is not inevitable.

It offers for those who wish to find it, proof that another kind of relationship is possible, a relationship, in the words of that early newspaper account quoted earlier, characterized by "hearty goodwill and brotherly feeling."

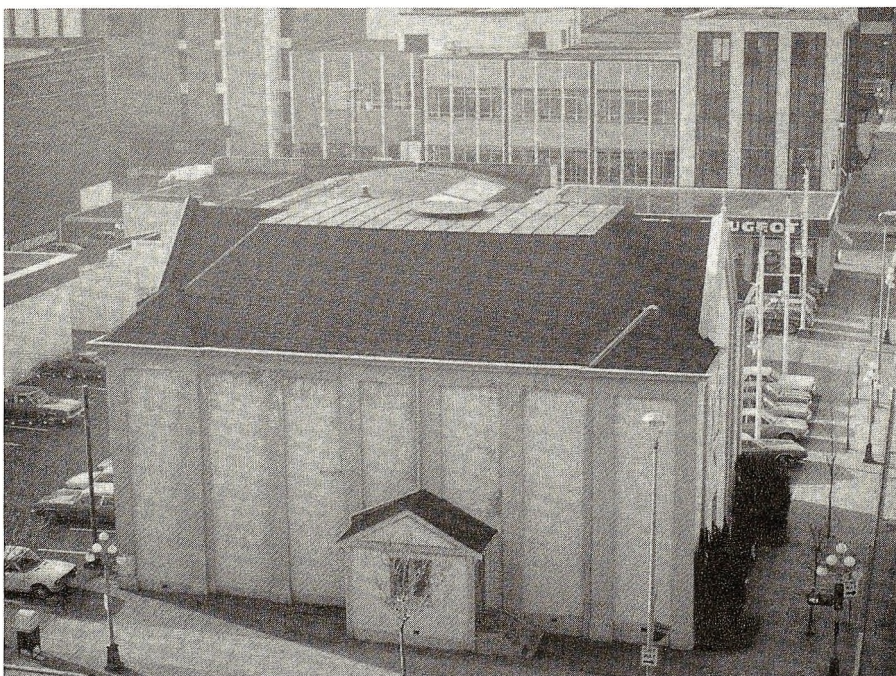
As Jews, we still await the coming of the Messiah. With the restoration of Canada's oldest synagogue, the members of the congregation believe more than ever that the best place to wait — outside of Israel — is the community of Victoria.



Original exterior (circa 1900)

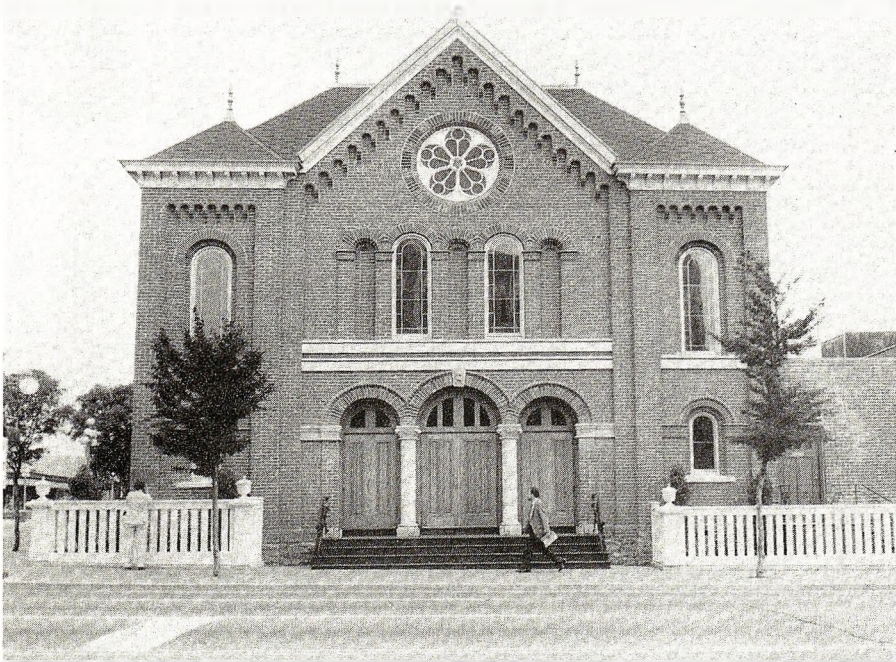


'Modernized' exterior (1948-82)



Modernized exterior (circa 1948-82)

Note all windows stuccoed over and skylight capped.



Restored exterior (1982-)



Original interior (circa 1900)



"Modernized" interior



Interior after restoration begun and false ceiling removed



Restored interior (1982-)