

Jewish Traveler RHODE ISLAND

By Kara Silverstein

Most people wouldn't think of visiting Rhode Island for its Jewish heritage, but the nation's smallest state has quite a lot to offer when it comes to Jewish history. With a Jewish community dating back nearly 350 years, Rhode Island has a rich religious ancestry and has worked to preserve a number of historic Jewish sites. I got to visit a few of these on a recent trip to Rhode Island.

My boyfriend, David, and I originally planned our visit to Rhode Island so that he could show me his old family home in Providence and I could ogle the mansions in Newport. We chose Labor Day weekend so that we could also fit in two music festivals – the Roots & Rhythm Festival in Charlestown and the Irish Music Festival in Newport – as well as a visit to Waterfire, an art installation in Providence.

At only around 50 miles long, it's possible to cover quite a bit Rhode Island in one weekend. David and I decided to use Providence as our initial launching point. We spent the first two nights at the beautiful Renaissance Hotel in downtown Providence. The Renaissance occupies a Masonic temple that was built in 1929. The hotel, which underwent extensive renovations, opened to the public in the spring of 2007. While the exterior of the building retained its neoclassical architecture, the interior was transformed into fabulously funky guest suites offering modern day sophistication.

On Saturday, we started off our morning at the mouthwatering Seven Stars bakery (820 Hope St, Providence), an artisan bakery serving breads, pastries and baked goods made from all-natural ingredients. Then we headed south to the city of Charlestown, where we spent the rest of the day lounging in the sun and listening to music at Roots & Rhythm Festival (www.rhythmandroots.com). The Labor Day festival offers four stages featuring blues, Zydeco, Cajun, rockabilly and roots music, along with a variety of vendor booths. Later that evening, back in Providence, I insisted on visiting Waterfire (www.waterfire.org), an environmental art installation that consists of a series of 100 bonfires blazing just above the surface of the three rivers that run through the middle of downtown Providence. It's a beautiful sight, and visitors can either view the fires from paths that run along the river or from gondolas offering tours. Waterfire occurs biweekly in the summer months and is accompanied by classical music and live performances.

The next day, David and I made our way south, to the glamorous resort town of Newport. The seaside city of Newport is home to many famous mansions, including The Breakers. David and I boarded a city bus to take us to the Cliff Walk, a 3.5 mile trail that runs



Touro Synagogue

along Newport's cliffs and offers spectacular views of the historic mansions on one side and the rocky coastline on the other. However, due to Labor Day weekend traffic and our own impatience, we jumped off early and found ourselves standing in front of the Touro Synagogue (85 Touro St., Newport), the oldest existing synagogue in the United States. The Touro Synagogue was dedicated on December 2, 1763, and is listed as a National Historic Site. Over the years, the Synagogue has played a number of important roles in history. During the Revolutionary War, it served as a hospital for British troops. Years later, during the Civil War, a trap door under the Bimah was used to house runaway slaves as part of the Underground Railroad.

Discovering the Touro Synagogue spiked my interest in the history of Jews in Rhode Island. I knew that my cousin, Barbara Levin, had grown up in the state and that my boyfriend's family had deep roots in Providence, but I had never really thought of Rhode Island as a particularly Jewish area. After a bit of research, I learned that the first Jewish settlers came to Rhode Island in 1658, when a group of fifteen Sephardic Jews from Barbados found haven in Newport, Rhode Island. Those fifteen Jews established America's second Jewish congregation, Jeshuat Israel. In 1677, the group purchased and consecrated property as the first Jewish cemetery in America. The Hebrew Cemetery, which still exists on Bellevue Avenue in Newport, is considered the oldest existing Jewish Cemetery in America.

Jewish migration to Rhode Island peaked in the years from 1900 to the outbreak of World War I. Most of the refugees settled in the South Providence, Smith Hill and North End neighborhoods of Providence, but congregations were also formed in Woonsocket, Pawtucket, Cranston and Newport. By 1924, the state's Jewish population reached 25,000.

(Continued on page 31)

Dirt ... A One-Man Show About Choices Wednesday, January 23, 7-9 PM, Gorelick Hall; Parents & Teens Welcome

John Morello spent most of his life watching friends and family become victims of destructive decisions. He responded by writing a one-man show, "Dirt." Not a lecture or seminar, "Dirt" truly is a play of many characters all performed by one actor. With 15 years of stage experience, Morello comically and effortlessly slips in and out of the characters to tell a story which is compelling, unique, and yet is unfortunately the story of far too many of our young people. You are sure to see someone you know or can relate to in his performance. Recommended by SADD, MADD, and ASAP (Association of Student Assistance Professionals), "Dirt" is now endorsed for camps and retreats like TIGS, MADD Power Camp,

and numerous peer mediation groups.

Every student will be captivated and changed by this powerful performance.

Born in Detroit and raised in Boston, John Morello has been on stage for 15 years as an actor and headlining comedian. At one time a high school drop out, he now holds a BA in Theatre Arts.

John considers himself a survivor of a "high risk" childhood. As a teenager, he witnessed friends and family struggle with addiction. As a teacher in a treatment center, he saw students struggle with the family cycles of self-abuse. John's response to these struggles is "Dirt." With this new show touring the country, John is connecting with audiences

in a unique theatrical setting. It is his hope that in his show everyone will see someone they know, especially themselves.

The Cast of Characters

David: A high school junior becoming entangled in ecstasy and prescription drugs.

Jason: Every town's "stoner" who sees weed and his actions as harmless.

Melissa: A college bound girl who drinks "socially" and is now dealing with the issue of date-rape.

Hank: A 79-year-old WWII veteran who reflects on his life, his choices, and his care for the young people in his life.

Wednesday, January 23, 7-9 PM, Gorelick Hall. ☆

Scott Fried, a promotional speaker who deals with issues concerning Jewish teens, spoke at Hebrew High in November.



Scott with Roz Cooper, director of Hebrew High.



Scott speaks with Hebrew High teacher Donna deGroot.

Mission to Cuba Brings Much Needed Sustenance to Small Jewish Community

There has been a Jewish presence on the island of Cuba since the day Christopher Columbus landed on its shores. His interpreter, Luis de Torres, a Jew who was fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, opted to stay on the island when Columbus left to continue his journey northward.

Since then the Jewish population of Cuba has continued to grow, from 20 men in 1763, to enough Jews to establish the United Hebrew Congregation in 1906. Several more synagogues and cultural organizations were founded until the time that Castro and the Communists took over the government. Many Jews fled at that time, but many more stayed, some unable to leave, others choosing to stay, as they were members of the Communist party and had socialist political leanings.

For many years, religious expression was strongly discouraged by the Castro government. It was only in the early 1990s that Castro eliminated religious discrimination and since then Jews have been free to worship as they please. However, life in Cuba is not easy for anyone. But, there is a



The whole group at Revolutionary Square.

spirit of rebirth in the Jewish community of Cuba.

With this in mind, Ahavath Achim, a Conservative synagogue from Atlanta, GA, planned a charitable mission to Cuba's Jewish community. Twenty-seven people joined the mission from all over the US, including Dr. Mike and Lenora Borchardt of Charlotte.

"This was a truly humanitarian mission," says Lenora, "and personally very rewarding."

During the one-week trip, the group visited Jewish communities in Havana, Cienfuegos, Trinidad de Cuba, and Santa Clara. The majority of the country's 1500 Jews (1100) live in

Havana. The remaining 400 are scattered across the island.

The group visited Casa de la Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba (the JCC of Cuba), also known as El Patronato, in Havana. There is a community pharmacy on the premises, run by two part-time doctors and two part-time pharmacists. Donated prescription and non-prescription medicines are dispensed at no charge to all, including non-Jews, who come with a doctor's prescription from their health care system. There are qualified doctors in Cuba, but medications are scarce.

The next day, the mission traveled to Santa Clara and Cienfuegos. Santa Clara is home to a small Jewish community and there is both a Jewish cemetery

(Continued on page 31)



Entrance to the Jewish cemetery.