Touro Synagogue

 4328 St. Charles Avenue

Touro Synagogue is the oldest Jewish congregation in the U.S. outside the original Thirteen Colonies. Chartered in 1827 and established the next year as the Congregation Gates of Mercy, with its first worship space on Rampart Street near Conti Street, the congregation followed the Ashkenazi traditions.

A Portuguese Sephardic branch split off in 1846 and established itself in the renovated Christ Episcopal Church building at Canal and Bourbon streets as the Congregation Dispersed of Judah, named for Judah Touro, who helped finance both the original Episcopalian structure and its renovation as a synagogue. (The cornerstone of the Sephardic synagogue now stands in the courtyard of the Historic New Orleans Collection.)

A new building for Gates of Mercy was built in 1850 on Carondelet Street near Jackson Avenue, since members were establishing homes upstream. The two groups merged in 1881 to become the Congregation Gates of Mercy of the Dispersed of Judah, housed in the Carondelet Street synagogue. Ten years later they formally embraced Reform Judaism.

Not until 1937 did the congregation take the name Touro Synagogue to honor the philanthropist Judah Touro. Touro also helped finance the Battle of New Orleans, in which he was wounded while fighting with General Jacksons forces, and had helped finance the Bunker Hill monument, among other causes.

Todays sanctuary, with its impressive domed roof, was dedicated in 1909. The architect was Emile Weil, who also helped design Temple Sinai and Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church. Its beautiful Ark, a gift of Judah Touro, came from the original synagogue. The stained glass is uniquely textured and hued, combining geometric forms with sinuous art nouveau lines.

The Forgotston Chapel and Norman Synagogue House were completed in March 1989 and have won architectural awards for complementing the principal structure.

The diamond-shaped chapel window facing St. Charles Avenue was donated in 1990 in memory of Norman Newhouse, whose favorite biblical quotation was from Micah: Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God. The competition to design a window that illustrated this verse was won by Ida Kohlmeyer, who grew up at Touro. Since she had never worked with glass, she developed a close partnership with Gene Koss of Tulane and with the Rambusch Studio of Greenwich Village, New York City. The window includes Jewish symbols and incorporates the Hebrew text throughout the work. As the viewer spends time studying the window, new symbols, seemingly hidden, come into view. Stylistically, the window has been compared to works by Marc Chagall (whose proposal for glass in the sanctuary when it was built was rejected because of the price).

Gene Koss, founder of the glass program at Tulane University and widely known for his work in cast glass, had never produced a window before his work at Touro Synagogue. The cast-glass centers of his two windows are two inches thick, weigh 5060 pounds each and taper to thinner glass, presenting the Rambusch studio with unprecedented engineering challenges. Steel and aluminum supplemented the traditional lead cames to accommodate the extra weight. Koss selected the thick glass because its depth holds the eye longer than traditional thin glass and challenges the viewer to contemplate its depths to read the contents.

The decorative elements combine acid etching, strands of colored glass, and painting with kiln-fired paints and enamels. Touro Synagogues imaginative additions to the New Orleans catalog of stained glass art powerfully blend the traditional with the modern.

*Visited*

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