

# Synagogue was hub in Amenia

10:21 PM, Apr. 19, 2011 |  
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The Beth David synagogue on East Main Street in Amenia. / Darryl Bautista/Poughkeepsie Journal

Written by

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AMENIA — While not nearly as large or well-known as the Jewish resorts once found in the Catskill Mountains, this Dutchess County hamlet once boasted its own vacation community.

It was established during the 1920s following the arrival of a number of Russian Jewish families that relocated from Ellsworth, Conn., where they had gone to escape anti-Semitism in nearby Sharon, Conn.

"R.R. Colgate, of the wealthy Colgate-Palmolive company, lived at Filston, an estate in Sharon, and he was not fond of Jewish people," said Ann Linden of the Amenia Historical Society. "As a result of his influence, they were not allowed to buy property there and instead settled in Ellsworth, where they farmed.

"It was difficult for them because they had to bus their children to different places for better schooling," she said. "They soon discovered they could come to Amenia, where there was a good school and also railroad service."

Given new opportunities, some became pharmacists and accountants, while others opened hotels and boardinghouses in the vicinity of Lake Amenia.

"People would come to spend an entire summer in an efficiency cottage," Linden said. "Amenia was so crowded that on Saturday night there was no room to walk on the sidewalks. There was a movie house, dances and other places that catered to the Jewish trade."

Jewish community members initially worshipped in each other's homes.

"The Osofsky family had a little hotel in the alley off East Main Street where Havens Real Estate is today," Linden said. "They held services there but eventually someone suggested they build their own temple."

Families and professional businessmen such as Alfred Dube, Philip Rothstein, Wolff Saperstein, Nathan Osofsky and about a dozen others spearheaded the effort. On May 14, 1929, the cornerstone ceremony for Beth David Synagogue was attended by 700, which in addition to the Jewish community included town officials and leaders of other faiths.

"Building the temple was really a huge effort, with people other than the Jewish community in town supporting it with funding," Beth David Treasurer Larry Ross said. "Rev. Steele from the Amenia Presbyterian Church was one of the speakers at the ceremony."

A change in vacationing preferences due to an increase in automobile ownership, coupled with severe flooding from 1955's Hurricane Diane — which destroyed a dam and drained Lake Amenia — brought an end to the town's resort industry.

With second-generation members of the temple's founding families leaving Amenia for other pursuits, the congregation's numbers fell significantly. Originally orthodox, it changed to conservative and eventually reform.

In 1983, the site of Lake Amenia, just west of Broadway, was transformed into Beekman Park.

Beth David Synagogue, a proud symbol of that earlier time, was added in 2002 to the National Register of Historic Places.

Today its congregation of 50 families continues to worship at its 3344 Route 343 location.