The Synagogue at Eastern State Penitentiary: History and Interpretation

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Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Historic Preservation 2004.
Advisor: David Hollenberg

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“The Synagogue at Eastern State Penitentiary: History and Interpretation”

Laura A. Mass

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in

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Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in
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MASTER OF SCIENCE

2004

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family whose love and support made its completion possible.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Situated within one of the southwestern corridors of Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, PA are the remains of a modest synagogue created during the early decades of the 20th century in order to serve the needs of the Jewish inmates (Fig.1). Historical research has revealed a compelling story about the history of the experience of the Jewish inmates within the prison. While the population fluctuated over time, the Jewish inmates of Eastern State comprised a tight-knit group who were consistently looked after and cared for by volunteers from the Jewish community. Jewish organizations not only helped fund various phases of construction of the synagogue, they made sure that all holidays were properly observed. The effect of the charity bestowed upon these inmates is reflected not only in their letters of appreciation, but also in their willingness to dedicate their own time and savings towards redecorating and refurbishing the synagogue over the years.

While it is known that the synagogue was utilized as a Jewish place of worship until at least the 1960s, the closing of the penitentiary in 1971 and subsequent years of neglect have taken a toll on the physical integrity of the site. The interior space is currently in a state of ruin and is progressively deteriorating at a rapid rate. Since reopening as an historic site in 1994, Eastern State has been selectively stabilized and restored for presentation to the public. Because the synagogue is both in need of serious conservation and presents a potential safety threat, it is currently not open for visitation and, for many years, few visitors were even aware of its existence. Recently, however, potential funding
sources have opened the possibility for the synagogue to be preserved and incorporated into the regular visitor tour route. The proposal for such an undertaking has prompted the need to address certain issues including researching the history of the site, assessing its significance, and considering various interpretive options.
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this thesis to develop an interpretive plan for the synagogue at Eastern State was guided by the philosophy and process outlined in the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter which states:

*The cultural significance of a place and other issues affecting its future are best understood by a sequence of collecting and analysing information before making decisions. Understanding cultural significance comes first, then development of policy and finally management of the place in accordance with the policy.*

The process of determining the cultural significance of the synagogue began with extensive historical research. The first step in conducting this research was a review of the Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Structures Report. This report includes a lengthy chronology that was assembled from information garnered from a variety of sources. Searches for key words within this document were done in order to locate any sources with information about the synagogue or the Jewish inmates. Most of the relevant information found had been obtained from the institution’s Annual Reports. However, because the information was often not documented in full, it was necessary to consult the original sources. Many of the Annual Reports are housed in the archives of Eastern State, though this collection only includes reports up through 1927. A trip to the State Archives is Harrisburg was helpful in accessing those Annual Reports missing from the Eastern State archive. The Annual Reports provided a plethora of information about the history of

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religious activity at Eastern State in general and of the Jewish inmates in particular, the various places in which the Jewish inmates worshipped, and the individuals and organizations that provided assistance to these prisoners.

Another major source of information was articles from the Philadelphia weekly newspaper, the *Jewish Exponent*. Issues of this newspaper were accessed at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, which has both original and microfilmed versions of the newspaper covering the years 1887-1955. Because of time constraints, selective research was done by only viewing issues printed during the fall and spring, when activity relating to the High Holidays and Passover would have been reported on. This tactic proved successful as the *Exponent* consistently reported on the volunteer work that was done to aid Jews at the various hospitals, sanatoriums, prisons, and other institutions in Philadelphia during the holiday seasons. The Center for Advanced Judaic Studies is also the repository for all of the personal papers of Sabato Morias, a collection that proved to be a useful source of information about early efforts to assist the Jewish inmates at Eastern State.

Important information was also obtained from the two inmate-produced publications, *The Umpire* and the *Eastern Echo*. Although the exact run of these publications is not known, the Eastern State archives houses issues of *The Umpire* covering the years 1913 and 1916-1918, and issues of the *Eastern Echo* covering the years 1956-1966. Each of these newspapers provided insight into the Jewish inmate experience at Eastern State and about specific individuals who provided support to these inmates. The consistent mention in the
Eastern Echo of a man named Joseph Paull and the important role he played in aiding the Jewish inmates led to a search at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania for further information about him. As it turned out, that institution is the repository for all of Paull’s papers, a collection which proved to be an invaluable resource, including both letters of thanks that were written to Paull by the Jewish inmates as well as the only known photographs of the Eastern State synagogue interior. Additionally, first and second-hand accounts of the motivations and experiences other individuals who volunteered to look after the welfare of the Jewish inmates at Eastern State was obtained through interviews.

Additional historic information was garnered from a series of interviews conducted with people who had either first or second-hand knowledge of the experience of Jewish inmates at Eastern State. All historical research was supplemented by an investigation of the synagogue interior in order to date some of the materials therein and determine the physical evolution of the site.

Once the historical information was completed, the resulting information was analyzed in order to assess the cultural significance of the synagogue on its own and within the context of the larger historic site of Eastern State Penitentiary. This significance was then used as a basis for determining what level of physical intervention and other interpretive techniques would best convey the significance of the site to visitors.

In writing about the interpretation of a site, definitions of relative terminology often vary depending on the source of the document. Because the Burra Charter was used as a
reference in writing this thesis, the following definitions from that document have been utilized throughout this paper:

*Cultural significance* – The aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations.²

*Fabric* – All the physical material of the place including components, fixtures, contents, and objects.³

*Conservation* – All the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance.⁴

*Preservation* – Maintaining the fabric of a place in its existing state and retarding deterioration.⁵

*Restoration* – Returning the existing fabric of a place to a known earlier state by removing accretions or by reassembling existing components without the introduction of new material.⁶

*Reconstruction* – Returning a place to a known earlier state and is distinguished from restoration by the introduction of new material into the fabric.⁷

*Interpretation* – All the ways of presenting the cultural significance of a place; may be a combination of the treatment of the fabric, the use of activities at the place, and the use of introduced explanatory material.⁸

As a final note, although the interior walls of the synagogue are oriented northwest-southeast and northeast-southwest, for ease of reference, they are referred to as the “northern,” “southern,” “eastern,” and “western” walls (Fig.2).

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² Australia ICOMOS, *Burra Charter: Article 1.2.*
³ Australia ICOMOS, *Burra Charter: Article 1.3.*
⁴ Australia ICOMOS, *Burra Charter: Article 1.4.*
⁵ Australia ICOMOS, *Burra Charter: Article 1.6.*
⁶ Australia ICOMOS, *Burra Charter: Article 1.7.*
⁷ Australia ICOMOS, *Burra Charter: Article 1.8.*
CHAPTER THREE: HISTORY OF EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY

Among the many social reform movements taking place in late 18th century Philadelphia was a radical shift in the attitude towards criminals and their punishment. Quakers had long been concerned with the treatment of those who broke the law, believing that emphasis should be placed on their reform rather than their punishment. In a shift away from the corporal and capital punishment that was standard in England during the 17th century, William Penn adopted a penal code that favored imprisonment. By the late 18th century, however, prison conditions in Philadelphia were hardly conducive to the reformation of those inside. Places such as the Old Stone Prison and the Walnut Street Jail were essentially large overcrowded holding pens where men and women were confined together, were able to obtain alcohol, and “generally riotous and disorderly behavior prevailed.” Concerned with worsening conditions within these institutions, a group of Quakers and other community leaders founded the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (later renamed the Pennsylvania Prison Society, referred to herein as “the Society”) in 1776. Members of the Society were inspired by prison reformers in England and advocated the building of a new type of prison, where solitary confinement, religious instruction, and regular labor would be used to inspire penitence and reform of the convicted.

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10 Ibid., 26.
11 Ibid., 26.
In 1821, after years of lobbying by the Prison Society, the state of Pennsylvania finally passed legislation authorizing the building of the Eastern State Penitentiary. A group of appointed Building Commissioners selected a plot of cherry tree covered farmland on the outskirts of the city as the site for the new building. In March of that year, a call for design proposals was announced. Because the new penitentiary was to be based on the concept of solitary confinement, the Commissioners stipulated that the design had to enable the prisoners to eat, sleep, work, receive religious instruction, and exercise without ever leaving their cells. The design also had to incorporate adequate plumbing, heating, and ventilation and allow for optimum surveillance of the prisoners by the guards. Only two proposals were seriously considered: a panoptic plan by William Strickland (1788-1854) and a radial hub and spoke plan by John Haviland (1792-1852). Though Haviland was the younger and less experienced of the two architects, his design was eventually selected on the basis that it was believed to be less expensive to build and to manage.

Haviland’s design for Eastern State was not entirely original, but rather largely based on hub and spoke plans that were being used for asylums and prisons in England and Ireland during the late 18th century. Eastern State, however, was on a far grander scale and, when completed, was actually the largest public structure in the country. Though Haviland’s original plans are lost, an engraving published in 1830 depicts the architect’s initial design conception (Fig.3). It shows, “an octagonal center connected by corridors to seven radiating single-story cellblocks, each containing two ranges of large single cells

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13 Ibid., 35.
with individual exercise yards."\(^{14}\) In every block, each of the 38 cells was to measure eight by twelve feet with a ten-foot high vaulted ceiling.\(^{15}\) As described in the book *Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions*:

> An iron latticework door and a solid wooden door connected each cell to an individual [open-air] exercise yard the same width as the cell and eighteen feet long. Initially there were no doors from the corridor to the individual cells; access to the cell was only through the outside iron door in the wall of each inmate’s exercise yard. There were, however, rectangular openings in the corridor wall through which food and work materials could be passed.\(^{16}\)

Surveillance could be achieved simply by standing in the central rotunda where a clear view down each of the cellblocks was possible. Additionally, partial views of the exercise yards could also be attained from the second floor of the rotunda.

The penitentiary was to be built primarily of brick and Wissahickon schist, a grayish-black micaceous local stone. Construction of the rectilinear perimeter wall, a massive structure which Haviland had designed in an imposing gothic style, began in 1822. In 1829, with only the wall, front entrance building, central rotunda, and cellblocks one, two, and three complete, the first prisoner was admitted into Eastern State. By the time all three completed cellblocks were fully occupied in 1831, it was clear that the original plan would never be able to accommodate the number of inmates entering the prison.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 40.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 40.
Haviland was therefore forced to revise his plans, and cellblocks four, five, six, and seven were built as two story structures (Figs.4 and 5).\textsuperscript{17}

Life inside the penitentiary was focused on reformation through solitude, reflection, religion, and the learning of a trade that could enable inmates to find employment upon release. Inmates were confined to their cells the entire day with only a Holy Bible and work materials to occupy their time. Weather permitting, they were allowed to roam around their exercise yard for one hour per day (Fig.6); otherwise, a small ocular skylight in their cell – nicknamed “the eye of God” – was their sole connection to the outside world. Communication with family, friends, or other inmates was strictly forbidden, and the prisoners’ only human contact was occasional visits from prison overseers, clergymen, and members of the Prison Society.

From early on, this system of solitary confinement was highly criticized as inhumane. Much of this condemnation came from states that had experimented with similar systems and then later abandoned them. Perhaps the sharpest denunciation came from the English author Charles Dickens. After visiting Eastern State in 1842 he declared:

\begin{quote}
The system here, is rigid, strict, and hopeless solitary confinement. I believe it, in its effects, to be cruel and wrong...I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Each second floor prisoner was given two cells, joined by a door, one of which functioned as the individual exercise yard.

Regardless of whether or not solitary confinement was cruel, it was certainly difficult to maintain. In spite of the policy, inmates were often instructed to work together doing various chores, construction projects, and teaching fellow-prisoners new trades. Mostly however, the erosion of solitary confinement was due to the ever-increasing inmate population within the institution. When the penitentiary was completed in 1836, it could house 450 prisoners in individual cells.\textsuperscript{19} By 1876, the number of cells had increased to 585 but the number of inmates had increased to 795.\textsuperscript{20} The only way to deal with this situation was through the sharing of cells. Despite the fact that four new cellblocks were constructed between 1877 and 1894 (Fig.7), a population of 1,400 at the turn of the century had some cells occupied by as many as four prisoners.\textsuperscript{21}

While the practice of solitary confinement had effectively been neglected for decades, it was not officially abolished at Eastern State until 1913. That year, a bill was passed allowing prisoners to congregate for learning, recreation, labor, and worship. The environment within the prison rapidly changed. A school for illiterate inmates was established, baseball and football games were played in the open spaces between the cellblocks, movies were screened, and concerts were held. Around the same time, a long-standing problem of limitations put on prison labor was addressed. For decades, the production of goods at Eastern State had been restricted by outside unions fearful of competition. In 1915, the state established a Prison Labor Commission to oversee all

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, \textit{Crucible of Good Intentions}, 43.\\
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 50.\\
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 50.\end{flushleft}
manufacturing within the prison.\textsuperscript{22} The increase in labor necessitated the creation of productions space – a problem that was solved by the conversion of the now obsolete exercise yards. Over the next decade many of these yards were roofed over, consolidated, and turned into workshops. Labor that once took place mostly within the confines of the prisoners’ cells now took place in these converted yards. Inmates were not only allowed to choose from a wide variety of employment opportunities – including shoe and clothing manufacture, printing, and model ship making – they were also allowed to retain a small portion of the profits from the sale of these goods.\textsuperscript{23}

The abolition of solitary confinement also had a tremendous impact on religious activity within the prison. While religious instruction as a means of reform was among the founding principles of the institution, this instruction had historically taken place within the prisoners’ individual cells. As mentioned in the Annual Report for 1914, on April 5\textsuperscript{th} of that year, “the prisoners were for the first time in the history of the Institution allowed outside of their cells for the purpose of religious worship.”\textsuperscript{24} To accommodate for this new privilege the second floor of the newly built Industrial Building (1906) was converted into a Christian chapel (Figs.8 and 9). Jewish religious activity also began to blossom at this time. The availability of the exercise yards for alternative uses provided a means for addressing the needs of this relatively small, but growing population within the prison and, at some point between 1913 and 1924, a space created by roofing over and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 88.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, Crucible of Good Intentions, 92.
\end{itemize}
removing the party walls of four exercise yards along cellblock seven was converted for use as a synagogue.
The story of the Jewish inmate experience at Eastern State Penitentiary is rooted in the history of Jewish volunteerism and philanthropic activity in Philadelphia during the 19th and 20th centuries. Though the number of Jewish inmates at Eastern State most likely never totaled more than eighty at one time1 (Fig.10), there is extensive evidence of consistent charitable efforts made on their behalf by local Jewish organizations and individuals. From modest gestures, such as the donation of reading materials, to coordination of the observance of Jewish holidays within the prison walls, members of Philadelphia’s Jewish community have historically volunteered their time, resources, and services to ensure the spiritual and emotional well being of these prisoners.

The first Jews to settle in Philadelphia probably arrived sometime in the early 18th century. Unlike other cities where Jewish immigrants were persistently faced with widespread anti-Semitism and ostracized from society, the Quakers were comparatively accepting of people from diverse backgrounds. Though a relatively small and fractured group, these early Jewish immigrants were nevertheless able to establish several

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1 Statistics about the Jewish inmate population at Eastern State were gathered from the institutional Annual Reports. Unfortunately, the only reports that were found to have breakdowns of the inmate population by religion were those covering the years 1924-1942. According to these statistics, the Jewish population generally increased during this time, going from 30 in 1924 and peaking at 80 in 1940. Two years later, the number of inmates had decreased to 48. Interviews with people familiar with the Jewish inmates at Eastern State during the 1950s and 1960s confirmed that this population continued to decrease during those decades. The notion that the Jewish inmate population never rose above 80, therefore, is based on the preceding information and a (possibly very false) presumption by the author that the population prior to 1924 had been gradually increasing rather than decreasing.
congregations throughout the city, including Mikveh Israel (1782) and Rodeph Shalom (1795).

A second wave of Jewish immigration to Philadelphia came during the 1830s as thousands of Jews left Germany where religious persecution was becoming intolerable. As a result, the Jewish population in the city soared from less than 1,000 in the early 19th century\(^2\) to around 75,000 at the turn of the 20th century.\(^3\) These new immigrants soon carved out their own financial niches – such as the running of department stores – and, within a generation, many had achieved economic prosperity. In addition to establishing themselves financially during the mid 19th century, members of the Jewish community of Philadelphia were at the forefront of Jewish religious, intellectual, and cultural life in America. Prominent leaders within the community established organizations that were instrumental in the foundation of many major Jewish institutions. The so-called Philadelphia Group, for example, whose members included several of the most influential men within the Jewish community, were involved in the creation of such institutions as the Jewish Publication Society (1845), the Jewish Theological Seminary (1886), the *Jewish Exponent* weekly newspaper (1887), and Gratz and Dropsie Colleges (1897, 1907).

While much of the work of the Philadelphia Group and others was geared towards intellectual and scholarly pursuits, the majority of organized efforts within the Jewish

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\(^3\) Ibid., 7.
community were philanthropic in nature. In spite of the number of Jewish immigrants in Philadelphia who managed to establish themselves financially, there were still a significant number of those who struggled to adjust to life in a new country. The concept of *tzedaka*, meaning justice or charitable righteousness, is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition; providing for those in need is considered not only a good deed, but an obligation under Biblical law. As such, extensive efforts were made by Jews to ensure the welfare of their own community. Early charitable work was often directly connected with a specific congregation whose members contributed money to fund the effort. Soon after the establishment of Mikveh Israel in 1782, for example, congregants raised money for the distribution of *matzah* to indigent Jews during Passover.⁴ These initial synagogue-based gestures soon evolved into larger, more far-reaching charitable organizations. Among the earliest were the Society for the Visitation of the Sick and Mutual Assistance, organized in 1813 to ensure that even the poorest Jews were afforded a proper religious burial, and the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society (1819) and United Hebrew Beneficent Society (c.1820) both of which distributed food, clothing and medicine to Jewish families in need.

Although benevolence and compassion were clearly at the root of this charity work, other motivations factored in as well. Among the German-Jewish elite of the 19th century, one’s involvement in charity work was seen as a sign of social status. As Edwin Wolf 2nd states, “The post-Civil war era was one in which the comparatively open American society began to crystallize, to become exclusionary and to establish clubs and societies

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basing membership on circumstances of birth. The Jewish community coalesced much in the same manner, but its aristocracy was created by philanthropic generosity and service rather than bloodlines.\textsuperscript{5} Accordingly, after the exclusive Mercantile Club was founded in 1853, “the social peak in the Philadelphia Jewish community was to [belong to this club] and to be chosen a manager of the annual Charity Ball.”\textsuperscript{6}

The need for charitable organizations increased exponentially during the final decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, as a third wave of Jewish immigration poured into the port of Philadelphia. By some estimates, approximately 60,000 Jews arrived in the city between 1882-1904,\textsuperscript{7} many of them fleeing the pogroms that began to erupt in Eastern Europe during the 1880s. Unlike the German Jews who had arrived decades earlier, these immigrants came mostly from Russia and brought with them an entirely distinct tradition of language, customs, and ways of life. In spite of their shared religion, the Russian immigrants were seen as outsiders, and their “Old World” appearance was considered a threat to the hard-won position of German Jews within Philadelphia society. The dichotomy that existed between these groups intensified as German Jews migrated out of the neighborhood where the new immigrants were settling, moving into the fashionable area along North Broad Street, while the Russian Jews lived in “dark, cramped, stifling apartments crowded with large families.”\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 127.  
In light of this situation, it can be argued that the charitable work bestowed upon the new immigrants was motivated as much by a feeling of obligation towards aiding one’s co-religionists, as by a desire to reform them and allay the threat they posed. Organizations such as the Society for Helping Women (later named the Jewish Maternity Home) not only provided food, clothing, and medical treatment to new mothers, but also offered the German-Jewish women who ran the organization an opportunity to “socialize and acculturate the poor, the ignorant, the destitute with their superior weapons of domesticity, piety, and moral motherhood.”

A further motivation of the charitable work initiated by German Jews during the influx of Russian-Jewish immigration was the fear that their co-religionists would be susceptible to conversion through other charity work being done by Christian missionaries. This was, in fact, not unheard of. At one point it was discovered that children attending Hebrew school on Sunday mornings were being enticed into Christian sewing schools in the afternoons. One prominent member of the Hebrew Sunday School Society initiated the opening of three Jewish Sewing schools to “counteract the sinister motives of missionaries, who on the plea of teaching our daughters to make their own garments, would rob them of the most precious ornament – their belief in the unity of God.”

Concern about the potential for conversion was, in fact, a driving force behind much of the charity work in the Jewish community, even before the arrival of the Russian-Jews. It

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10 Ibid., 153.
is not surprising therefore, that much of this work was directed towards those considered to be in especially vulnerable situations. The founding of the Jewish Foster Home and Orphan Asylum (1855) and the Jewish Hospital (1867) were motivated, in part, to ensure that Jews who were ill, lonely, or despondent did not seek consolation in Christianity merely because there was no other religious outlet available to them.

Considered among the most vulnerable were those Jews who were incarcerated within the city’s prisons. The potential for assimilation was undoubtedly present at Eastern State Penitentiary where religious observance – inherently Christian-oriented – was built into the ideology of the institution. During the earliest years of the prison’s operation, all religious instruction was provided by volunteer clergymen from local churches and from the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons. During this time, and throughout much of the 19th century, voluntary choirs and preachers from various denominations held religious services “in each of the several corridors with a 15 minutes’ service of song in the center [of the building].”

These services so filled the corridors with prayer that the inmates, confined to their cells, had little option but to listen. As one chaplain wrote, “the truth as it is in Jesus [was] proclaimed in such a way that every inmate in the institution has heard it as fully as if he has been free to attend the ordinances of God’s house outside the walls.” Clearly, exposure to Christianity was virtually unavoidable for Jewish inmates and, in the absence

of their own religious guidance, may have seemed a tempting alternative. As one ex-

prisoner wrote:

*When I was sent to prison, I was despairing of God and the world. Having
been thrown around half the earth for more than 15 years, I had lost all
connection with my co-religionaries (sic), all remembrance of my religion.
The solitude of prison life, the feeling of utter abandonment and desolation
caused me to seek consolation in the Christian religion and if ever man
was eager to find the truth, to receive faith, it was I. I was willing to
sacrifice reasoning and to accept anything that could console me and
reconcile me with God and Life.*

In 1838, the Pennsylvania legislature resolved to instate a paid Moral Instructor at
Eastern State whose duty it was to “advise and instruct the prisoners therein confined in
their moral and religious obligations.”

Some objected to the appointment of a single chaplain, however, concerned about the likelihood of “sectarian proselytizing.” Soon after, therefore, the Moral Instructors permitted “every one, Catholic, Protestant, or
Jew…to take counsel in private from the minister of his choice.”

As early as 1845, there is record in the Warden’s Report of Jewish clergy paying visits to
the Jewish inmates at Eastern State and providing them with religious and moral
support. Beginning in 1893, there is epistolary evidence that Jewish inmates were
visited by Sabato Morais, one of the most renowned and influential leaders within the

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13 William Fraenkel to Sabato Morais, 10 June 1893, Sabato Morais Papers (Box 7, FF1), Center for
Advanced Judaic Studies, Philadelphia, PA.
14 *Laws of the General Assembly*, 1837-38, quoted in Harry Elmer Barnes, *The Evolution of Penology in
16 *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Inspectors of the State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of
Jewish community. Born in 1823 in northern Italy, Morais immigrated to Philadelphia in 1851 and took the prominent position of hazan (cantor and reader) at Mikveh Israel. He soon became well known not only as a religious leader, but also as an advocate for social justice who “played an active role in almost every civic and charitable cause in the city.”\textsuperscript{17} In addition to speaking up for the rights of women, slaves, and Native Americans, Morais was deeply involved in the effort to aid new Jewish immigrants. Morais seemed compelled to provide support to Jewish prisoners not only out of his compassion to help those who were unable to help themselves, but also to mitigate the potential of Jewish prisoners, alone and despairing, to abandon their faith. To this end, Morais provided individual counseling, assisted inmates by contacting their families, and donated what one Moral Instructor called “acceptable reading [material] for our Hebrew population.”\textsuperscript{18} Though it is unknown exactly how often Morais went to Eastern State Penitentiary, it is clear that his visits to Jewish prisoners provided encouragement and support. In a letter dated September 8, 1895 an inmate at Eastern State wrote Sabato Morais expressing his gratitude:

\begin{quote}
I was very glad to have you visit me this week and wish to thank you sincerely for the kindly interest you have manifested in my unfortunate behalf. During the last years when fate seems to have been against me, when nothing but hardship and ill luck have continuously fallen to my lot, I had almost come to the conclusion that in this wide world of ours there was but little hope for me to rise again to that level of social life which I once occupied. –Joseph Oldmann 7524\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Joseph Oldmann to Sabato Morais, 8 September 1895, Sabato Morais Papers (Box 7, FF8), Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, Philadelphia, PA.
When Sabato Morais passed away in 1897, his position of hazan and many of his charitable ventures were taken over by Reverend Leon Elmaleh. While it is unknown whether Elmaleh actually visited Eastern State, he did work to ensure that all of the Jewish inmates had access to reading material that would help satiate both their religious and emotional needs. In 1899, Elmaleh made an appeal through the *Jewish Exponent* “to all of those who can furnish Yiddish, German, or English books, magazines, or newspapers”\(^{20}\) to the Jewish inmates in order to help combat “the torture of combined solitude and idleness.”\(^{21}\) Additionally, in order to keep watch on the overall situation of Jewish inmates, Elmaleh established an organization of rabbis charged with visiting the various prisons in Philadelphia and “reporting on the condition of affairs.”\(^{22}\) It is most likely that Jewish inmates at Eastern State continued to be visited and receive religious counsel from local rabbis during the first years of the 20\(^{th}\) century, though there is no direct evidence of this. There is evidence, however, that other volunteers from the Jewish community periodically visited the prison to attend to the needs of their incarcerated co-religionists. As reported in the 1906 Annual Report by the Moral Instructor at the time, “our Hebrew population has been most efficiently looked after by members of that faith.”\(^{23}\)


\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) “Rabbis Visit Prisons,” *Jewish Exponent*, 7 July 1899, p.3.

With little documentation available, it is difficult to determine exactly when the Jewish inmates began gathering to observe various religious holidays and where they gathered over the years. There is reference in the Annual Report for 1901 that “Hebrews…have facilities for instruction and counsel”\(^{24}\) though it is not stated where these facilities are and who is providing the instruction. It was not until 1913, after the policy of solitary confinement was officially abolished at Eastern State, that any organized Jewish activity took place outside of the prisoner’s cells. Though Christian inmates began to assemble for services in the Industrial Building chapel in 1914, Jewish services apparently began a year earlier. Articles printed in the inmate-run newspaper, *The Umpire*, on October 8 and 15\(^{th}\) 1913 reported that, “Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year (5674) was appropriately observed by the Jewish inmates of the institution”\(^{25}\) and that “the Hebrew Day of Atonement, (Yom Kippur) was observed by the Jewish inmates…by prayer and fasting, from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m.”\(^{26}\) As reported in *The Umpire*, these services were both held in the abandoned Emergency Hospital, a large stone building constructed in 1908 between cellblocks two and eleven (Figs.11 and 12).

The ability for the Jewish inmates to gather and hold services in this way can be attributed not only to the abolition of solitary confinement, but also to the pro-religious ideology of the Warden at the time. Warden Robert J. McKenty, who presided over Eastern State Penitentiary from 1908-1923, strongly believed that “the best prison system


\(^{26}\) “Local Pick-Ups,” *The Umpire*, 15 October 1913, p.4, ESP Archive.
is the one that combines steady work offering a livelihood outside with religious training that arouses a man’s sense of moral obligation.”

While McKenty’s advocacy of religion within the prison seems to be directly in line with the founding principles of Eastern State, it appears that in the years preceding his tenure there had been a trend away from religious activity within the prison. Defending his position, McKenty published an article in *The Umpire* on August 23, 1916 stating that “religion – the true, clear-sighted, straightforward, strengthening kind of religion, no matter which the denomination that supplied it – is second to no other influence as a means of permanent reform.”

Consequently, McKenty enthusiastically encouraged any opportunity for the inmates to embrace their own religion. Not only did Warden McKenty authorize the use of the Emergency Hospital for Jewish religious services, he personally attended almost every Jewish holiday observance, often addressing the inmates after the service. Referring to a service held in 1913, inmate B6076 reported in *The Umpire*:

*The Warden, who always takes a deep interest in religious affairs, came in and... gave a heart-to-heart talk. He related the story of Daniel, and prophesied that some day, another Daniel would come out of the wilderness appointed by the Lord, and take a stand for His people and lead them back to the right way so that they may once more be God’s chosen people in every sense of the word.*

Where the Jewish inmates gathered to worship in the years immediately following is more difficult to determine. References garnered from both *The Umpire* and the *Jewish Exponent* give some sense of this history but also leave open the potential for a myriad of

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28 Ibid.

interpretations of the information provided. The first mention of the word “synagogue” appears in the 1916 *Umpire* article by Warden McKenty in which he writes, “In Eastern State Penitentiary it was decided to give Jewish prisoners the synagog (sic) they needed…” An article published in the *Jewish Exponent* in 1917, reporting on what was perhaps the first official Passover celebration at Eastern State, describes only that the Jewish inmates, “assembled in a large room, where an Ark of the Covenant…was standing on a raised platform.” An article printed in the following year states that Passover services were “held daily in an improvised synagogue.”

Based on this information, there is no reason not to believe that for much of the second decade of the 20th century, the Emergency Hospital continued to function as a synagogue. However, beginning in May of 1916, announcements appear in nearly every issue of *The Umpire* that “Jewish services are held on Saturdays at the Band-room.” The reference to Jews gathering at the “band room” and not at the Emergency Hospital may indicate that sometime between 1913 and 1916 another space within the prison was specifically designated for use as a synagogue. Even if this is true, it is unclear where exactly this space may have been located. Plans of Eastern State drawn up in 1936 identify a “band room” at the juncture of the upper rooms of cellblock six and the central rotunda. With all of the construction and reconfiguration of the prison that occurred during the early 20th century.

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33 These announcements appear in *The Umpire* from 17 May 1916 through 25 December 1918. Similar announcements may have appeared in subsequent issues, however no issues of *The Umpire* dating after 1918 were found.
century, however, it is unlikely that this is the same “band-room” referred to in *The Umpire*.

It is also possible that the “band-room” was in fact an early name for the site along cellblock seven currently referred to as the synagogue. Some of the first exercise yards to undergo conversion were along cellblock seven. According to the Annual Report for 1912, “twenty-one yards [were] covered on the Seventh Block thereby making five large rooms, two of which are being used as a school for the illiterates, the remaining being used as a Trades School…”34 It is conceivable that one or more of these converted yards was originally used as the “band room” and that sometime between 1913 and 1916 the space was re-designated for use as a synagogue. It is more likely, however, that the “band room” was simply another name for the space used for religious services within the Emergency Hospital. This presumption is supported by the description of Yom Kippur services printed in the *Jewish Exponent* in 1918, which states that “a special building has been permanently set aside for the purpose of holding religious services.”35 If the converted exercise yards along cell block seven were being used as a synagogue at this time, it seems unlikely that the article would refer to the space as a “building.”

While a dearth of information makes it impossible to determine exactly when the space now known as the synagogue was actually established for that use, one strong possibility is that this occurred in 1923/24. Since the Annual Report for 1912 does not indicate

35 “Yom Kippur Services at Penitentiary,” *Jewish Exponent*, 20 September 1918, p.3.
which exercise yards along cellblock seven were converted for other uses that year, it is conceivable that the space in which the synagogue is located was not actually created until 1923/24. The Annual Report covering the period between June 1, 1923 and May 31, 1924, notes that, “the stone walls dividing the old unused individual cell yards at the rear of the cells on the right and left sides of the 7th Block have been torn down…providing 9 excellent additional workshops for the inmates.”36 The cells along the southern side of cell block seven were designated even numbers 2-68. According to a map from 1984, the corresponding exercise yards were turned into 11 workshops including a tin shop, a boat shop, a cane shop, a rug weaving shop, and seven wood working shops. The synagogue is situated amidst these workshops, occupying the exercise yards of cells number 42, 44, 46, and 48 (Fig.13). In attempting to answer the question why valuable space that could have been utilized for more workshops would have been allocated instead for use as a synagogue, it is possible to look to the fact that 1924 was also the year that Alfred Fleisher, himself a Jew, began his tenure as the President of the Board of Trustees of Eastern State.37 Evidence of Fleisher’s dedication to the welfare of the Jewish inmates can be found in the fact that, after his sudden death in 1928, the Jewish inmates, “as an expression of their sense of loss…and as a lasting memorial of the kindness and justice [Fleisher] has always shown them, erected a bronze tablet in his memory in the synagogue of the Institution and dedicated the synagogue in his name.”38

While it is important to attempt to determine exactly when the current synagogue at Eastern State was first used, it is equally, if not more, important to recognize the shifts that occurred in the overall experience of the Jewish inmates during the early 20th century. In 1913 when the inmates gathered for what may have been the first time to celebrate the High Holidays, there is no indication that they received any outside help in organizing this religious observance. Rather, services were led by inmate B6676 “who possesses a pure tenor voice [and] acted as Cantor and reader.”

Four years later, in 1917, when the prisoners convened to celebrate the holiday of Passover, the service was coordinated and conducted by an outside group – the Prison Aid Committee, a Jewish volunteer organization made up of representatives from several of B’nai B’rith’s constituent Lodges within Philadelphia. Founded in New York in 1843, B’nai B’rith is the oldest Jewish service organization in the world. In 1852, the first B’nai B’rith Lodge was established in Philadelphia. Although no documentation was found as to exactly when the Prison Aid Committee was established, their involvement at Eastern State and other prisons in the city was possibly driven, at least in part, by an increase in the number of Jewish inmates. This increase was most likely the result of the overall growth of the Jewish population in Philadelphia during the early decades of the 20th century and the burgeoning involvement of Jews in organized crime.

For approximately the next twenty years, the Prison Aid Committee was among the prevailing sources of funding for and coordination of Jewish religious activity at Eastern

39 “Jewish New Year in Prison,” The Umpire, 8 October 1913, p.2, ESP Archive.
40 “Seder Services at Penitentiary,” Jewish Exponent, 13 April 1917, p.12.
State. Unlike earlier Jewish volunteer efforts at the prison that were motivated, at least in part, to forestall the conversion of Jewish inmates, the work of the Prison Aid Committee was geared largely towards reformation and eventual integration into society. To this end, a holistic approach was employed that not only provided the Jewish prisoners with the opportunity to observe certain holidays, but also a means for their religious edification, general education, and emotional and psychological growth. By 1918, the committee had appointed Rabbi Dr. Jay Medoff, an instructor of Hebrew and librarian at Gratz College, to the position of Jewish Chaplain in charge of officiating over all religious services at the prison. Additionally, the Chaplain would regularly visit the Jewish inmates individually in their cells to provide council, “help them maintain contact with their families and aide[s] them, as far as possible, to solve their problems and supply their needs.”

While Chaplain, Dr. Medoff also supplied the Jewish inmates with prayer shawls and phylacteries, organized a Bible class to provide religious instruction to the Jewish prisoners, helped set up a Jewish division of the prison library, and introduced a lecture series in which prominent members of the Jewish community visited the prison and spoke with the Jewish inmates on such topics as “Our Duty to Our Parents” and “The Jews of Philadelphia in Colonial Times.” In 1924, when Isaac Feinberg took over the position of Jewish Chaplain, he instituted an assembly every Wednesday afternoon during which “the news of the day, all subjects of general interest, having no criminal implications, are read or told and commented on, and educational, political, and scientific

42 “Yom Kippur Services at the Penitentiary,” Jewish Exponent, 20 September 1918, p.3.
44 “Holy Day Services at Penitentiary,” Jewish Exponent, 10 October 1919, p.10.
45 “Passover Observed at Eastern Penitentiary,” Jewish Exponent, 29 April 1921, p.9.
These meetings also provided a forum during which ministers of religion, instructors of the University of Pennsylvania, welfare workers, and members of the Prison Aid Committee addressed the prisoners on a variety of topics. Periodically, arrangements would also be made for various singers to visit the prison and entertain the Jewish prisoners.

In addition to weekly Shabbat services, which had been regularly conducted at Eastern State since at least 1916, the Prison Aid Committee coordinated services for the observance of both Passover and the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. All services were conducted in the synagogue by volunteers from the Prison Aid Committee who also addressed the inmates about the meaning of the holidays and their connection to Judaism and Jewish life. These services were widely attended by the Jewish inmates of Eastern State. Beginning in the late 19-teens, not only did the extent to which these holidays were observed grow more elaborate, the Jewish inmates were allowed to observe other religious days as well. During the first Passover organized by the Prison Aid Committee, matzah was provided to the Jewish inmates so that they could abide by the dietary requirements of that holiday. Two years later, the inmates were permitted to eat kosher meat during the High Holidays that had been brought in from outside the prison. That same year, the inmates were granted permission to assemble every morning for an hour of public prayer. The most striking expansion of Jewish

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47 “Seder Services at Penitentiary,” Jewish Exponent, 13 April 1917, p.12.
48 “Holy Day Services at Penitentiary,” Jewish Exponent, 10 October 1919, p.10.
49 Ibid.
activity within Eastern State occurred between 1924 and 1928, which, perhaps only coincidentally, were the same years Alfred Fleisher presided as President of the Board of Trustees. In 1924, for the first time, religious services were conducted for the holidays of Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret, and Simkhat Torah. The celebration of Sukkot that year is particularly emblematic of the effort being made by the Prison Aid Committee to provide for the religious needs of the Jewish inmates. As a holiday that celebrates the harvest season in the land of Israel, Sukkot is traditionally observed by erecting a suka (a temporary dwelling constructed of wood or canvas and covered with branches or leaves) and sleeping and eating within this structure for the duration of the holiday. For obvious reasons, strict observance of Sukkot is clearly not feasible within the context of a prison. However, it is significant that in observance of this holiday, “the skylights of the synagogue were opened, the grating covered with greens, and services were held and meals of the prisoners were eaten under proper ritual conditions.” In 1927, the inmates were permitted to enjoy kosher meals entirely apart from the other prisoners during all eight days of Passover. The food for these meals was “purchased by the institution and prepared in new utensils, in a kitchen provided for the purpose” by volunteers from the Jewish community. The following year, Hanukah services were conducted every evening for the duration of the holiday and in 1928 the festive holiday of Purim was celebrated by both the traditional reading of the Megillah and entertainment that was provided for

50 “Holiday Services at ESP,” Jewish Exponent, 24 October 1924, p.8.
52 “Holiday Services at ESP,” Jewish Exponent, 24 October 1924, p.8.
53 “Passover Observances Under the B’nai B’rith Prison Aid Committee,” Jewish Exponent, 22 April 1927, p.18.
54 Ibid.
the prisoners. The religious services held at Eastern State were often attended not only by inmates and the Jewish Chaplain, but also by Fleisher, many – if not all – members of the Prison Aid Committee, and other members of the Jewish community who came to speak to the prisoners.

While the period of 1924-1928 appears to be among the most active years of Jewish activity (or least the best documented), the work of the Prison Aid Committee and other organizations and volunteers continued at Eastern State well into the 1960s. What is most remarkable about the effort to oversee the welfare of the Jewish inmates is not only the level of commitment on the part of the individual volunteers, but also the appreciation it fostered among the prisoners themselves. Among the most noteworthy individuals who volunteered their time at Eastern State were William Portner, Joe Paull, and Bernie Watman, each of whom dedicated years of their lives to attending to the needs of the Jewish prisoners.

When William Portner (Fig.14) passed away in 1948, his son Jay found a slip of paper in his wallet that read, “There is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, it ill behooves us to point a finger at the rest of us.” According to Jay Portner and many others, these words accurately represent the way in which the elder Portner led his life. Born in Russia in 1888, William Portner and his family immigrated to Philadelphia in 1890. At the age of twenty, William Portner graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Law School and soon began career as a lawyer. After

57 Dr. Jay Portner, son of William Portner, interview by author, Wyncote, PA, 19 February 2004.
marrying, however, he left his law practice and began working in the manufacturing business with his father-in-law. From early on, Portner was involved in various charitable causes throughout the city. Because of his training as lawyer, however, the plight of prisoners was of particular interest to him, and providing aid to Jewish inmates soon became the focus of his humanitarian endeavors. Portner was involved with B’nai B’rith for over 25 years, serving as Chairman of the Prison Aid Committee from around 1922 until 1930, and volunteering at Eastern State in a variety of other capacities throughout the rest of his life. From approximately 1922 until at least 1940, Portner attended and participated in nearly every holiday service conducted at Eastern State. After these services, he and other volunteers would speak with the inmates relaying news from “the outside” and offering council and companionship. In the Annual Report for 1929, Jewish Chaplain Isaac Feinberg wrote that, “Mr. Portner show[s] constant interest in the welfare of the men.”

Around the same time that William Portner began heading the work of the Prison Aid Committee, Joe Paull (Fig.15) independently began volunteering at Eastern State. Born in Russian-Poland in 1893, Joseph Paull (né Polivoda) immigrated to the United States in 1914, eventually making his way to Philadelphia where he established a wholesale meat business. In 1923, Paull, who was extremely active in many organizations, met Alfred Fleisher while doing charity work at the Temple Men’s Club and at the Eagleville

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58 “Seder at Eastern State Penitentiary,” Jewish Exponent, 21, April 1922, p.12.
59 Eastern State Penitentiary Annual Report for the year 1930.
Tuberculosis Sanatorium. Fleisher invited Paull to visit Eastern State Penitentiary and perform his strongman act, which had earned the 6’2” 220 pound Paull the title of “The Iron King” and included such feats as twisting iron bars into knots and ripping telephone books in half with his bare hands. While at the prison, Paull was struck with a realization:

Well, here was I, donating my services as an athlete entertaining men in trouble. Trying to bring into their lives a few moments of something a little different from their everyday routine. But I realized at once there were more important things than just being an athlete. In my prison audience were men who needed other types of help. I resolved to do all I could to contact rehabilitated inmates and directly aid them.

Paull recognized that one of the fundamental issues within the prison system was the inability of inmates to obtain parole because they had no job prospects. As he wrote in a four-page pamphlet entitled “Let’s Do Something About Holdovers”:

Society is not quick to forgive and forget, unfortunately. This is the bitter lesson the pre-release inmates are forced to review over and over when seeking to complete a parole plan. They seek redemption – but all avenues are closed to them. Home and sponsorship are denied them, just as is gainful employment. Thus they become a statistic – a ‘holdover’.

Paull firmly believed that the surest path to reintegration into society and prevention of recidivism among released inmates was securing them a job. He therefore developed a program at Eastern State that helped to match prisoners with employers as well as helping

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64 Portner, interview.
aiding them in finding homes and sponsors; it is estimated that he was, “personally responsible for finding employment for more than 300 parolees over the years.”67 Referring to his efforts to help solve the ‘holdover’ problem at Eastern State, Paull said, “I help anybody. Religion, creed, or color make no difference to me.”68 Still, as a Jew, Paull also took care of his incarcerated co-religionists, donating meat from his own butcher shop for holiday meals – including corn beef, short ribs, tongue, and salami69 – and occasionally conducting services at the prison. He eventually began working with Portner and the Prison Aid Committee, looking after the needs of the Jewish inmates while they were imprisoned and ensuring that their transition to life outside was as smooth as possible. Paull, Portner, and other volunteers would not only vouch for the inmates upon their release and assist them in finding jobs, they would also frequently pay for them to spend time in Atlantic City to help the men get rid of the “prison pallor” that often stigmatized newly-released inmates.70

Even after William Portner passed away in 1948, Paull continued to volunteer at Eastern State along with others including Bernie Watman (Fig.16). Watman, who was born in 1896 and grew up in Philadelphia, was involved in Jewish charitable causes throughout his adult life.71 Early on, he spent much of his free time visiting Jewish patients at local hospitals and during the 1940s began regularly visiting the Jewish inmates at several of

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67 “Joseph Paull Dies at 76; Strong Man Aides Parolees,” Evening Bulletin, 7 July 1966, Joseph Paull Papers (MSS 44, Box 1, Folder 2).
69 Martin Lees to Joseph Paull, 27 April 1962, Joseph Paull Papers (MSS 44, Box 1, Folder 5).
70 Portner, interview.
Philadelphia’s prisons.\textsuperscript{72} Watman himself had little formal Jewish education and though he occasionally conducted religious services at Eastern State, his main contribution was that of a companion to the inmates while they were incarcerated. As reported in the inmate-run newspaper the \textit{Eastern Echo}, Watman would sit in the synagogue with the Jewish inmates assembled around him in a circle and, “tell stories relating to current events, local news which he feels will be of interest to men whose homes are in the city of Philadelphia, and monitor a question and answer session between himself and the men.”\textsuperscript{73} Like Portner and Paull, Watman’s dedication to the welfare of these inmates did not end once they were released from prison. He frequently sponsored inmates upon their release, helped them obtain employment, gave them clothes, and met with them regularly, sometimes for years, to make sure that they were staying “straight.”\textsuperscript{74} Watman’s devotion to the Jewish inmates was well known, and he was once overheard saying, “I love this work and cannot wait until the day I retire from active business life because then I can devote all my time to it.”\textsuperscript{75} According to Watman’s daughter, Avi Katz, he even dreamed of one day turning his own home into a halfway house.

The commitment of these (and many other) members of the Jewish community to overseeing the welfare of the Jewish inmates at Eastern State was met with profound appreciation on the part of the prisoners themselves. In 1919, one of the Jewish inmates (B9386) wrote in \textit{The Umpire} of their gratitude to Warden McKenty saying:

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{74} Katz, interview.  
\end{footnotesize}
The Jewish inmates are very fortunate indeed in having so kind and liberal a Warden as our own ‘Bob’. In years gone by – before Robert J. McKenty became Warden of this institution – the Jewish inmates had only the memory of former Pesachs and Seders in the outside world, with their friends and families to cheer them during the Passover holidays. But now it is different, yes very much so. Thanks to our friend ‘Bob’…we are able to celebrate Passover as it should be celebrated.\textsuperscript{76}

During the 1920s, on at least two occasions, a volunteer by the name of Mrs. Brill was presented with gifts from the Jewish inmates including an “electric lamp stand”\textsuperscript{77} and a “15-jewel gold wrist watch”\textsuperscript{78} in recognition of her work preparing and serving all of the kosher meals during the holidays. In 1929, the inmates presented William Portner with a letter expressing their gratitude to him. Beautifully printed (presumably using the facilities available at Eastern State) and hand-signed by each prisoner, the letter reads:

\begin{quote}
The Inmates of Eastern State Penitentiary professing the Hebrew faith are desirous of extending to you their sincerest gratitude for the many kindnesses shown by you in their behalf, and with this in mind, in meeting assembled, we wish to convey this thought to you. Unsolicited many times, you have come to the assistance of those of us who need a friend. You have given of your time and energy to help the unfortunate ones. You have shown neither discrimination or favoritism; those who were in difficulty could always depend on your cheering words and it would be ungrateful if we were not to write these few lines of appreciation.\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

Among the most effusive expressions of gratitude made by the Jewish inmates were directed towards Joe Paull. In addition to presenting Paull with his portrait as painted by one of the inmates, dozens of letters were written to Paull thanking him for his

\textsuperscript{76} Quoted in “The Passover at Eastern Penitentiary,” \textit{Jewish Exponent}, 25 April 1919, p.3.
\textsuperscript{77} “Holiday Services at ESP,” \textit{Jewish Exponent}, 24 October 1924, p.8.
\textsuperscript{78} “Kosher Meals at Penitentiary,” \textit{Jewish Exponent}, 16 April 1926, p.16.
\textsuperscript{79} Jewish Inmates of Eastern State Penitentiary to William Portner, 28 February 1929, personal papers of Dr. Jay Portner.
humanitarian efforts. Following are excerpts from several of these letters – written by both individual prisoners and by the Jewish inmates collectively – which express their gratitude to Paull and reveal the positive impact his involvement at Eastern State had on their lives.

For nothing lifts a man in prison so much as knowledge that he has a friend standing by on the outside, always ready to aid him, if not always materially, then at least spiritually.\textsuperscript{80}

The Jewish Inmates

It is not easy to find words that can say what we feel about you. We in here are well aware of the extent of your help to us. You have done so very much for us that we are far and away indebted to you. Maybe we can repay in part by becoming decent citizens and, like you and your wife, reach out a hand to those who need help.\textsuperscript{81}

Sydney Bleecher (D6582)

Before my departure from this world...I feel it is my duty and obligation to express my profound gratitude to my steadfast dear friend, Joe Paull; a friend indeed to all members of humanity. During my travail of 15 years in prison and my association with Joe Paull, I have been observing his ways in coming here every single day. Nothing keeps him from coming: neither biting coldness of winter nor the uncomfortable heat of summer. Instead of going with his loving family to a summer resort (Atlantic City), he would forego this pleasure to come to see me, as well as other Hebrews. He knew, of course, the eagerness with which we all looked forward to his visit. Our struggles are readily forgotten in his amiable and sweet words of encouragement...These admirable pursuits Joe Paull has pursued all during life, he has often deprived himself for the sake of others, often at great inconvenience and with no thought of recompense. As for me, I remember his numerous, never to be forgotten, acts of kindness shown me. To name one in particular, both times I had undergone surgery he came to visit me, not only during the day time but at ten in the evening...Therefore

\textsuperscript{80} The Jewish Inmates to Mr. Joe Paull, 30 September 1944, Joseph Paull Papers (MSS 44, Box 1, Folder 5).

\textsuperscript{81} Sydney Bleecher to Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Paull, 27 April 1948, Joseph Paull Papers (MSS 44, Box 1, Folder 5).
will I pray for him, a prayer he surely deserves for all the good he has done for me.\textsuperscript{82}

Morris Bolber (D6210)

\textit{It is wonderful that men such as...yourself are considerate enough to give of their valuable time in order to make life a little more pleasant for the less fortunate.}\textsuperscript{83}

The Jewish Inmates

\textit{It is difficult to find words to adequately express our gratitude. We feel, however, that you will derive considerable satisfaction from the knowledge that your weekly visits and personal concern for our welfare contribute enormously toward the alleviation of our situation.}\textsuperscript{84}

The Jewish Inmates

The work of volunteers such as Portner, Paull, Watman and others was not only greatly appreciated by the Jewish inmates, it seems to have fostered a sense of pride and camaraderie among these men. This notion is reflected most clearly in the evolution of the synagogue. The creation of this space and its periodic upgrading was the result not only of the outside Jewish community which donated money and materials, but of the willingness of the Jewish inmates over the years to devote both their spare time and precious savings to the continual maintenance and care of the one space within the prison they could call their own.

It is difficult to know what the site now known as the synagogue looked like when it was first converted for that use, as details of the space’s creation are undocumented. The Annual Report for 1924 that describes the conversion of the yards along cellblock seven notes that, “a roof has been built over these yards, concrete floor laid, and steam heat

\textsuperscript{82} Morris Bolber to Mr. Joe Paull, 25 January 1954, Joseph Paull Papers (MSS 44, Box 1, Folder 5).
\textsuperscript{83} The Jewish Inmates to Mr. Joseph Paull, 26 April 1954, Joseph Paull Papers (MSS 44, Box 1, Folder 5).
\textsuperscript{84} The Jewish Inmates to Mr. Joe Paull, 27 September 1955, Joseph Paull Papers (MSS 44, Box 1, Folder 5).
The original roofing material was most likely wood and, in fact, almost all of the other converted yards along cellblock seven retain some evidence of this. Inserted into this roofing were metal and glass skylights which, although not mentioned in the 1924 Annual Report, were probably part of the original construction. Without any windows, these skylights would have been essential for the conversion of the yards into usable spaces, especially given the fact that almost all of the yards were turned into workshops. Due to years of exposure and neglect after the prison’s closing, nearly all of these original wood roofs have almost entirely collapsed – a process that was certainly expedited by the inability of the gradually deteriorating wood to support the weight of the skylights. The synagogue, however, was saved from this fate because, at some point (or perhaps originally), it – along with the four workshops to the west of it – was re-roofed with concrete and the skylights re-inserted.

To create a finished interior space, the stone walls were most likely plastered from early on. It is known that the interior walls of the exercise yards were originally coated in a layer of plaster. Though this plaster was most likely still intact after the conversion of the yards, a new layer would have been necessary to conceal the evidence of the party walls that had been torn out to create the larger space. The plaster would have also concealed the original entrance doors to the yards from the cells and from the exterior, the latter of which had been blocked up with masonry. Unlike the original plaster on the exercise yards, which was applied directly over the stone, the interior of the synagogue was covered first with a mortar scratch coat to create a smooth surface and then finished with

a layer of plaster. Later plastering campaigns of the synagogue’s interior involved the attachment of sleepers and wire mesh lath to the wall, over which the new layer of plaster was applied.

There is evidence that from early on efforts were made to both beautify the interior of the synagogue and create a functional place of worship. Among the most dramatic beautification efforts occurred between 1927 and 1928 when, “Two inmates, at their own expense, reconstructed the interior of the synagogue, from plans prepared by the Hoffman-Henon Co. firm of architects.” There are several remarkable aspects about this reference, not the least of which is the fact that the two inmates volunteered their own money and labor to enhancing the appearance of their place of worship. Equally noteworthy is the fact that actual architectural plans were drawn up for this reconstruction. Hoffman-Henon was, in fact, a relatively well-known firm at the time, specializing mostly in churches and theaters, including the famed Boyd Theater which still stands on Chestnut and 19th Streets in Philadelphia. If the Hoffman-Henon Co. was not paid for their work either by the Prison Aid Committee or some other interested party, but instead donated their services, it is unclear what their connection was to the Jewish inmates of Eastern State may have been. One possible explanation is that around that time, a Jewish architect named Israel Demchick (1891-1980), who was an authority on synagogue design, was associated with Hoffman-Henon Architects. If Demchick was, indeed, working for the firm during the late 1920s, he may have volunteered to draw the

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plans for the prison synagogue. Unfortunately, these plans, if they still exist at all, have yet to be recovered. It is difficult to know, therefore, what type of “reconstruction” was done to the synagogue. Much of the embellishments that are evident in the synagogue today almost certainly date from the 1940s and later, and it is possible that little if no evidence exists of the 1927/28 work.

In addition to the reconstruction, the Annual Report for that year also mentions that the synagogue was re-decorated with a, “color scheme designed by Mr. Shilling, through the kindness of Kayser & Allman.” 88 This is not the first reference to the decoration of the synagogue. A 1926 article in the Jewish Exponent states that before Passover, “the synagogue was repainted for the holiday.” 89 There are, in fact, many layers of paint that are currently evident in the synagogue, suggesting that the space was periodically refurbished. One of the earliest layers can be found on the ceiling – a grayish-blue coat that was applied over one of the earliest plaster layers (Fig.17). The “color scheme” referred to the in the 1927 Annual Report seems to imply that during this campaign, the space was decorated not with one color, but with several. However, a thorough paint analysis would be necessary in order to determine the exact chronology of paint layers and whether or not any of them involved multiple colors or even decorative motifs. Alternatively, the decorations may not have been paint at all. At this point, it is not known who “Mr. Shilling” was. Preliminary research has revealed that Kayser & Allman was a Philadelphia-based wallpaper manufacturer. No evidence of any wallpaper has, of yet, been discovered within the synagogue though it is possible that the deep brown

89 “Passover at the Eastern Penitentiary,” Jewish Exponent, 2 April 1926, p.16.
streaks which can be found over some areas of plaster, are remnants of glue sizing left over from when wallpaper was removed (Fig.18).

The furnishing of the synagogue was also the result of efforts by both the Jewish inmates and outside individuals. The Ark of the Covenant mentioned in the 1917 *Jewish Exponent* article about that year’s Passover celebration is described as having been “built by the inmates themselves.”\(^9^0\) Although this service may have occurred in another location, the Ark was presumably transferred once the yards along cellblock seven were converted into a synagogue. By 1927, or perhaps earlier, this Ark was equipped with two Torahs that had most likely been donated by some outside individual or organization.\(^9^1\) At some point, a reading desk from which services were conducted was also either donated or built by the prisoners. And by 1928, “The material and work of making a satin damask cover for the reading desk and hangings for the Ark, [had been] supplied by two women interested in the welfare of the Jewish inmates.”\(^9^2\) Though these textiles are no longer at the site and the current Ark, which is made of plywood, most likely dates from the 1940s, a slanted reading table that could possibly be the original can still be found within the synagogue (Fig.19).

According to documentary evidence, it appears that the next major renovation campaign occurred during the 1940s. In 1944, as preparation for a rededication ceremony for what was by then known as the Alfred Fleisher Memorial Synagogue, the room was

\(^{90}\) “Seder Services at Penitentiary,” *Jewish Exponent*, 13 April 1917, p.12.
\(^{91}\) “Passover Observances Under the B’nai B’rith Prison Aid Committee,” *Jewish Exponent*, 22 April 1927, p.18.
“redecorated and repainted.”[93] It is possible that this “redecorate” refers to the construction of both the plywood Ark and the plywood benches and wainscoting that are now found along the north and south walls of the synagogue (Figs.20 and 21). Remnants of paint along the trim of the wainscoting indicate that, at one time, it was painted bright blue (Fig.22). Brown and red asbestos tile flooring was installed at some point after this, as evidenced by the fact that the tiles are not laid under the legs of the benches but rather cut to fit around them (Fig.23). As indicated in a photograph taken inside the synagogue in 1959, by that time, ornamentation within the synagogue also included several woven rugs on the floor, ceiling lights, and brass candelabra wall fixtures flanking the Ark (Fig.24). The Ark itself was adorned with a plaque inscribed with the Ten Commandments, and hanging from the ceiling in front of the Ark was an eternal light (see Fig.24). At some point, possibly during the 1940s renovation, a new ceiling was created by affixing wood sleepers to the plastered concrete ceiling, nailing furring strips and expanded wire lath to the sleepers, and covering the lath with a thick new layer of plaster (Fig.25). This ceiling retained a smooth finish until at least 1959, as seen in the photograph from that year (see Fig.24). Another photograph taken sometime between 1959 and 1966[94] shows that decorative plaster embellishments were later added, including a cornice connecting the Ark to the ceiling, molding that ran the perimeter of the room, and beaded trim around each of the skylight openings (Figs.26). Currently, a layer of lead white paint is visible on the remaining portions of trim that are the least

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[94] Although this photograph is undated, evidence of decorative plasterwork that still exists in the synagogue can be seen in the photograph. The photograph must therefore have been taken after the 1959 photograph in which the decorative plaster does not appear. Because the photographs are part of Joseph Paull’s personal papers, they most likely were not taken after 1966, the year he died.
deteriorated and remnants of bright blue paint can be seen along the cornice above the Ark (Fig.27). Though not visible in this photograph, the partial remains of rounded beaded trim painted dark green in the ceiling’s center most likely dates from the same campaign (Fig.28). The same photograph, along with another taken after 1959, also show the presence of one or more large tables in the synagogue (one of which is covered with a fringed velvet cloth), at least five folding chairs, an embroidered Torah Ark curtain, and different ceiling lights and wall fixtures flanking the Ark (see Fig. 26, Fig.29).

One of the most perplexing alterations made to the synagogue is the insertion of a plywood partition wall at the west end of the room (Fig.30). The wall, which remains intact, rises to just several inches below the ceiling. Cut into the north end of the partition wall is a doorway, and hinged to its frame is the bottom half of a door with a small protruding shelf nailed to the top (Fig.31). Within the rather small space behind the partition are a long wooden table (Fig.32), a bare-wood shelving unit nailed to the upper portion of the southern wall, and a small wooden rack as well as a row of wall hooks both attached to the back of the partition (Figs.33 and 34). Additionally, a metal sink rim can be found on the wooden table (the sink basin is currently located in the middle of the main room amid a pile of plaster rubble), water pipes protrude from the floor in one corner, and the bottom portions of the stone walls have been faced with large glazed tiles (see Fig.33). It is fairly certain that this partition was put in place after the beaded plaster trim was installed (post 1959) as the trim extends along the ceiling behind the partition (Fig.35) and, had the partition already been in place, this would not have been feasible. Although it remains unclear exactly what this space was used for, because Passover
Seders – and presumably other holiday meals – were eaten in the synagogue, it can be speculated that the space was associated with food preparation. There is no evidence that food was actually cooked in the area behind the partition wall, but it is possible that meals were assembled there and served to the inmates from behind the half-door.

The pictorial and physical evidence relating to the synagogue reveal that improvements were being made to this space at least until the early 1960s. This suggests that in the decades preceding the closing of Eastern State, there was still a viable Jewish community within the institution. Documentary evidence from this period, though less extensive than from earlier decades, reinforces this notion. The Jewish population at Eastern State by and large continued to increase during the 1930s peaking at 80 in 1940. During this time, the Prison Aid Committee and various other organizations and individuals remained active in their work at Eastern State. By 1942, though the Jewish population had decreased to 48, services were still conducted in the synagogue on both Shabbat and the major holidays, weekly meetings were still held, and visitors still came to speak with the Jewish inmates.

Exact statistics regarding the Jewish population at Eastern State during the 1950s and 1960s are not available, though oral histories have revealed that, for the most part, there were never more than twenty men. Additionally, very little information was found relating to Jewish activity within the prison during this time. The Prison Aid Committee went through numerous incarnations and name changes over the years, and it is difficult to sort out what ultimately became of this organization. It is known however, that the
Jewish inmates continued to be looked after by people from the Jewish community, including members of the William Portner Lodge, which was founded in 1949, a year after Portner passed away. Even with a greatly reduced Jewish inmate population, these volunteers still managed to hold services and organize activities geared towards reforming the prisoners. In 1958, each of the ten inmates who attended the High Holiday observance contributed a portion of their savings towards the planting of trees in Israel in the name of the “Jewish inmates of Eastern State Penitentiary and Mr. Joe Paull.”

As of 1963 there was still a Jewish Chaplain on duty at Eastern State. Though no documentation was found, presumably Jewish activity continued at the prison until it was closed down in 1971 and the entire inmate population was transferred to another prison in Graterford, Pennsylvania. Located 35 miles northwest of Philadelphia, Graterford was built as the “farm branch” of Eastern State Penitentiary during the late 1920s. Soon after the first cellblocks were constructed, the overcrowded Eastern State began transferring inmates to Graterford and by the mid-1930s, the latter had a population of approximately 1,800. During its first years of operation, the Jewish population at Graterford was so small that they were bussed to Eastern State for holiday services. In 1932, however, the Prison Aid Committee had appointed separate members to look after the Jewish inmates at the new prison and by the 1940s William Portner, Joseph Paull, and Bernie Watman were all splitting their time between Eastern State and Graterford. Each of these men continued assisting the Jewish inmates at the two prisons until their

95 “Joe Paull & Guests Conduct Services,” Eastern Echo, winter 1958, p.27, ESP Archive.
96 Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, Crucible of Good Intentions, 89.
97 Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, Crucible of Good Intentions, 89.
98 Eastern State Penitentiary Annual Report for the year 1932.
deaths in 1948, 1966, and 1985 respectively. In memory of their hard work and dedication, plaques were hung in the Graterford synagogue where religious services are still held for the Jewish inmates (Fig.36).
By the 1960s, Eastern State Penitentiary had fallen into a severe state of decline. Paint and plaster were still intact, but the aging infrastructure was no longer able to accommodate the needs of a population that far exceeded any size ever anticipated. Eastern State had, in fact, begun to decline both physically and organizationally decades earlier. In 1923, the well-liked Warden McKenty was fired after a grand jury investigation found corruption within his administration. 1 Although some improvements to the buildings were made during the 1930s, the Warden at the time, Herbert Smith stated that, “We cannot reform men when we place them in dark and unhealthful cells, in an environment worse than the one they came from. All principles of modern penology are opposed to conditions which exist here.” 2 By the 1940s, in spite of increased recreational and educational activities within the prison, the environment had become dangerous. Violence among prisons and at the hands of the guards, combined with decades-old accusations that the institution was “antiquated” and “obsolete,” led to calls for the closing of Eastern State in 1944. Some plans for improvements to old structures and designs for new structures were drawn up in the 1950s, but mostly, these plans never came to fruition. The 1960s at Eastern State were marked by continual decline, a major riot, and increasing talk of closing the institution altogether. On the basis of its historical and architectural significance, the prison was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1965 but by the end of the decade, almost all of the inmates had been transferred to

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1 Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, Crucible of Good Intentions, 90.
2 The Evening Ledger, 24 March 1933, quoted in Johnston, Finkel, and Cohen, Crucible of Good Intentions, 93.
Graterford. In 1971 Eastern State was entirely shut down and remained closed until 1994 when it was reopened as an historic site. During those intervening years the abandoned structure gradually declined into a state of ruin – a victim of both vandalism and the encroachment of nature.

The current state of the synagogue is a prime example of the devastating toll of years of neglect. A large Paulownia tree – a species that grows rampantly throughout the prison – has sprouted beneath one of the exterior walls, its trunk and branches intertwining with the stone, causing deformation and deterioration (Fig.37). The wooden door to the synagogue, while still intact, is covered with multiple layers of cracked and peeling paint (Fig.38). Ghosts of where two Stars of David and a mezuzah once hung can be seen on the door and doorframe (Fig.39). Fortunately, one of the cut out metal Stars of David was salvaged and is on display in another location within the prison. However, the other objects – along with the bronze plaque that once hung dedicating the space as the Alfred Fleisher Memorial Synagogue and an exterior identification sign – were removed or stolen long ago and their whereabouts are now unknown.

Inside, the synagogue is a site of almost shocking devastation, mostly caused by years of water infiltration (Fig.40). Both skylights are missing several panes of glass, which has allowed rain, snow, and other debris to enter the interior space (Fig.41). While the concrete roof of the synagogue is seemingly sound, the plaster ceiling – along with the wood furring strips and metal lath – has almost entirely detached. In some places remnants of lath and plaster hang tenuously from the wood sleepers (see Fig.25) but, for
the most part, the ceiling has completely collapsed, covering the entire floor with a layer of debris approximately four to five inches deep (Fig.42). Beneath this wreckage, the flooring of the synagogue has been maintained in near-perfect condition, though this is more likely due to the durability of the asbestos tiles than to their protection under the debris of the collapsed ceiling. The damage caused to the ceiling was most likely the result of both water directly permeating the ceiling and the extremely high humidity within the room. These conditions resulted in the corrosion of the nails which held the ceiling in place and the saturation of the porous gypsum plaster, causing the entire ceiling to collapse under its own weight.

Water infiltration has also led to severe damage along the northern wall of the synagogue where cracks in the roof have allowed precipitation to saturate the stone. Again, this moisture has rusted both the wire lath and the nails that attached it to the wall, causing the entire protective wall covering to fall away (Fig.43). The exposed stone – which is covered with extensive biological growth – reveals the scars that resulted from the removal of the party walls (Fig.44) between the yards as well as three of the entranceways that once led to the corresponding cells. One of these entranceways retains its original iron gate, while the other two have wooden doors (Fig.45). The entranceway to the fourth cell is visible on the other side of the plywood partition and is blocked up with masonry. The collapse of the plaster along the northern wall has also caused what is most likely irreparable damage to the plywood wainscoting and wall bench, which were fastened directly to it (see Fig.43). The southern wall of the synagogue has clearly not been subjected to comparable water damage. Though much of the exposed wall plaster
has crumbled off, the plywood features remain largely intact (Fig.46) and exhibit only superficial deterioration including flaking of the shellac coating (Fig.47). Beneath the wall bench, the steam heating pipes that were installed in 1924 can still be seen, covered in multiple layers of peeling blue and green paint.

As seen in one of the existing photographs of the synagogue’s interior, the plywood wainscoting once also extended over the portions of the wall on either side of the Torah Ark (see Fig.24). However, as with the northern wall of the synagogue, water permeation has caused extensive damage in this area and the remains of the materials that once covered the wall now lie on the floor in a mass of splintered wood, mangled lath, and crumbled plaster (Fig.48). In contrast, the Ark itself is in relatively good condition. The plywood structure is not splintered or delaminated and even retains much of its dark shellac finish (Fig.49). The hinged doors that once enclosed the compartment where the Torah is stored, however, are detached and badly damaged (Fig.50). Additionally, the satin curtain that once hung behind these doors is missing and only a small patch of tattered material now hangs from the upper portion of the compartment (Fig.51). Furthermore, both the plaque of the Ten Commandments and the Eternal Light are missing and the plaster cornice built over the Ark – though in one piece – is badly eroded and has lost much of the definition of its original form (see Fig.20). Several other furnishings remain within the synagogue including a large rectangular wooden table, a slanted reader’s table, four wooden folding chairs, and the bottom portions of two wooden stools (Fig.52). Also, the remains of a green-painted wooden shelving unit can be found still attached to the collapsed wainscoting along the northern wall (Fig.53). As with
practically every surface in the room, these furnishings are covered with the debris of the collapsed ceiling.

The back of the synagogue, behind the plywood partition, is also in extremely poor condition. The same deterioration mechanisms – including the infiltration of water and the destructive growth of the Paulownia tree – have caused the collapse of almost all of the ceiling and wall plaster (see Fig.32). Among the only intact plaster features are a portion of beaded trim around the skylight opening (see Fig.35) and a small section of the wall molding that once ran around the perimeter of the room. The latter is no longer actually attached to the wall, and is currently balancing precariously on top of the partition (Fig.54). The tile facing along the bottom portion of the wall is also badly damaged – bulging in some areas and almost completely separated from the wall in other areas (see Fig.33). Additionally, the glazed surfaces of many of the individual tiles covered in a crust of efflorescence. (Fig.55). As with the main room of the synagogue, the entire floor – as well as the large wooden table – is covered with a thick layer of debris from the collapsed ceiling plaster (see Fig.32). Partially buried within this debris are pieces of wood that may have once been nailed to the back of the partition wall. Other furnishings still present within this space include the shelving units and wall hooks (see Figs.33 and 34)) and two ceiling lights, one of which still retains a bulbous glass fixture (Fig.56).  

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3 Two of the same glass light fixtures can be seen hanging from the ceiling on either side of the Torah Ark in the 1959 photograph of the synagogue interior.
CHAPTER SIX: INTERPRETATION

Entering the Eastern State synagogue today can elicit a broad range of reactions. Some are overwhelmed by the physical condition of the site, some wonder what it looked like in its original state, others are curious about what types of activities took place there, still others are shocked that a synagogue even exists within a prison (a.k.a. the “What Jewish criminals?” reaction.) Similarly, some find the ruinous state of the synagogue evocative and would like the room to remain untouched while others are appalled that a sacred site exists in such a state of devastation and would prefer to see the site fully restored.

There are, of course, certain measures that must be taken to ensure the safety of the site if it is to be open to the public for visitation. Any intervention (or lack of intervention) beyond this, however, is an interpretive decision. These decisions should ideally be based on an assessment of the cultural significance of the synagogue – on its own and within the context of the larger historic site of Eastern State – and how this significance can best be conserved and conveyed to visitors. My position is that the significance of the synagogue at Eastern State Penitentiary lies not in its original physical fabric but in the story that it represents. Further, this story can most effectively be communicated through the reinstatement of the space as a whole so that a visitor may gain a true sense of the time, care, and devotion that went into making a sacred space within the walls of a prison.
As characterized by the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, “The places that are likely to be of significance are those which help an understanding of the past, or enrich the present, and which will be of value to future generations.”¹ The synagogue at Eastern State fills these criteria on a number levels. On the most basic level, the very existence of a space that is dedicated to communal activity is representative of the changes that took place at Eastern State as result of the breakdown of the solitary confinement policy. Over the course of the prison’s history, the institution transformed from a place where inmates were subjected to complete isolation and centralized control over their every move, to a place where inmates were allowed to work, recreate, eat, and worship together enabling them to create their own social networks and affording them some degree of control over their experience.

Second, the fact that the space is a synagogue brings to light the reality that there were, indeed, Jewish inmates at Eastern State. This fact serves to highlight the diversity of the prison’s inmate population and educates visitors who, for whatever reason, might otherwise not consider that Jews were included in this population. The existence of the synagogue may be of particular interest to visitors who are themselves Jewish and are interested in learning about an aspect of their culture’s history that was perhaps previously unfamiliar to them.

Third, the fact that evidence of a Jewish population at Eastern State does not exist solely in document form, but also in the form of an actual place of worship highlights the historic importance of religion within the institution. As noted above, the concept of religion as a means of reform was one of the founding ideologies of Eastern State. Although religious instruction was initially Protestant-oriented, the benefits of religious influence were considered so important that, as the prison population diversified, so did the institution’s religious outlets. Even during the first half of the 20th century, when anti-Semitism was prevalent enough that one might not think Jewish inmates would be afforded complete religious freedom, the administrators of Eastern State authorized the building of a synagogue and allowed the Jewish inmates to fully observe many holidays.

Fourth, the synagogue is emblematic of the history of volunteerism within the Jewish community of Philadelphia. As seen, this is a long and complex history in which philanthropy was sometimes geared towards self-serving ends. For the most part, however, those who devoted their time to helping the Jewish inmates at Eastern State represent a willingness within the Jewish community to look after their own members of society, even those who have been marginalized. Also significant about this work is that, in several instances, it was a multi-generation effort. Although Jay Portner did not follow exactly in William Portner’s footsteps, his father’s work inspired him to establish the William Portner Welfare Fund, which provides aid to Jewish prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. Similarly, Hanley Rubinsohn, who volunteered leading Jewish holiday services during the 1950s and 1960s, was inspired to work at Eastern State Penitentiary.

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2 Dr. Jay Portner, son of William Portner, interview by author, Wyncote, PA, 19 February 2004.
because he had been brought there as a young child by his own father who worked as a volunteer physician at the prison. In turn, Hanley Rubinsohn’s son (as well as the son of one of his fellow volunteers) currently volunteers at Graterford prison leading services for the Jewish inmates.³ For the most part, however, the work that was done to help the Jewish inmates at Eastern State is indicative of a level of dedication and long-term commitment to aiding members of one’s own community that existed at one time and that perhaps does not exist as strongly today. In light of the decline of local Jewish volunteer efforts in general, and efforts to aid Jewish inmates specifically, one can question why this has happened and what can be done to inspire a new generation of people willing to dedicate their time to these causes.

Finally, the synagogue is a manifestation of the impact the work of the volunteers had on the Jewish inmate experience at Eastern State. As seen, the dedication of these volunteers was deeply appreciated by the Jewish inmates. While there is no direct evidence of the ultimate “reformation” of any of these criminals, certainly the concern that was shown for their religious and emotional well being fostered in them some sense of pride and self-worth that was reflected in their continual effort to maintain and beautify their synagogue year after year.

Undoubtedly, the synagogue at Eastern State possesses a considerable amount of cultural significance and this significance is largely “historic” and “social” (as opposed to

“aesthetic” or “scientific.”) The question therefore remains, what interpretive approach best conveys the significance of this site to visitors. Before answering this question, it is important to recognize that the synagogue is not an isolated site, but rather one that exists within the context of the larger historic site that is Eastern State Penitentiary. As such, consideration must be given to what other interpretive techniques have been utilized throughout other areas of the prison.

The primary goals of Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, according to the mission statement are: 1) to preserve and restore the architecture of the site, 2) to make the site accessible to the public, 3) to explain and interpret the site’s complex history, 4) to place current issues of corrections and justice in an historical framework, and 5) to provide a public forum where these issues are discussed. To these ends, the managers of Eastern State have decided to employ a variety of interpretive approaches.

Currently, the vast majority of the prison that is open to visitors is being maintained as a stabilized ruin. Emphasis has been placed not on restoring the site to a pristine state, but rather on preserving as much of the remaining original fabric as possible, preventing further deterioration from occurring, and ensuring that the site is safe for visitors. Selective preservation projects have been done throughout the prison, including wood and plaster consolidation, repointing with original mortar formulations, and stone desalination. In an attempt to inhibit further damage to the interior of the prison due to water infiltration, temporary coverings have been placed over broken skylights. Additionally, netting has been hung over areas of the ceiling in order to catch pieces of
loose plaster and portions of the prison that are severely damaged are closed off to visitors entirely. For the most part however, Eastern State looks like a place that has been abandoned and left to deteriorate for decades. This minimal intervention approach is a conscious decision based not only on the fact that the complete restoration of such a large site would be prohibitively expensive, but also on a desire to preserve both the original fabric and the “age value” of the prison.

In contrast to the “stabilized ruin” approach, there are other areas of Eastern State that have been entirely reconstructed, both out of necessity and for interpretive purposes. A portion of the roof in the link between cellblocks two, ten, and eleven that was badly deteriorated has been rebuilt using modern materials. Likewise, the roof of the Industrial Building has been entirely reconstructed because the original material was so damaged that it was no longer serving its function of providing protection to the interior space. At the same time, several of the individual cells have been restored in order to give a sense of what they looked like when they were occupied by prisoners. One of these cells has been entirely refurbished to show the clean smooth plaster walls, wooden floors, original skylight, and furnishings that would have existed around the time Eastern State was first opened. Another of the cells that was for a time occupied by Al Capone has been decorated to look as it did while he was incarcerated. The furnishings – including Oriental rugs, wooden furniture, lamps, and a radio – while not authentic, give the visitor a sense of the privileged conditions under which the famed mobster served his sentence. At the same time, the cell itself has had little restoration work and the badly deteriorated plaster ceiling has covered the opulent furnishings with a layer of white dust.
Eastern State is also used as a venue for contemporary art installations, which are displayed throughout the site on a rotating basis in order to create a forum for connecting the past with the present. These include pieces that address current correctional and judicial issues such as Nick Cassways’ *Portraits of Inmates in the Death Row Population Sentenced as Juveniles*. Additionally, there are pieces, such as *Matthew and Jonathan Stemler: Juxtaposition*, that make an object out of the prison itself to explore the phenomenon of physical decay.

Most visitors to Eastern State tour the site by listening to a self-operated audio device. Visitors are guided through the prison and have the opportunity to stop at key locations to learn about the site’s history, architecture, notable inmates, and daily prison life. The audio guide also provides information about the various art installations and addresses commonly asked questions including the frequently asked, “Why don’t you fix this place up?” Stops on the audio tour are supplemented by signage that is hung throughout the prison including interpretive text as well as historic photographs and illustrations that give the visitor a sense of what the prison looked like during various stages of its existence. Private tours are also available for class trips and other large groups. These tours are led by staff tour guides and can be geared towards different age groups and interests. Additionally, all visitors are able to view numerous artifacts from the site’s collection – including everything from inmate-produced crafts to inmate-produced weapons – that are displayed in various locations throughout the penitentiary.
Because of the size and complexity of Eastern State Penitentiary, the variety of levels and of intervention and interpretive techniques can be employed without sending a conflicting message to the visitor. Similarly, any number of these strategies can be applied to the synagogue without seeming grossly incongruous with the rest of the site. To determine what approach is most appropriate for the synagogue, it is helpful to look at an analogous site – the Separate Prison at Port Arthur Historic Site in Tasmania, Australia.

Like Eastern State Penitentiary, Port Arthur is an historic prison complex that is now open to the public for visitation. During the 17th century, the British Empire began establishing penal settlements in its various colonies where convicts were sent to serve out their sentences. Because of its remoteness and isolation, the Tasman Peninsula was considered an ideal location for such settlements and several were established there during the 19th century, including the one at Port Arthur. Between 1830 when the first convicts were sent to Port Arthur and 1877 when the penal colony was closed down, dozens of buildings were constructed in order to serve the needs of the various people who inhabited the site. Among these buildings was the Separate Prison (originally known as the Model Prison), built in 1848. The design of the Separate Prison was partially inspired by Haviland’s plan of Eastern State, consisting of four wings in a cruciform pattern with individual cells and walled exercise yards.

Over the course of its long history as a tourist attraction, the different managers of Port Arthur Historic Site have employed a wide variety approaches to the interpretation of the site’s many buildings – some structures have been maintained as ruins, some have been
restored to look the way they did during a certain period of history, and some have been adapted for new uses. The Separate Prison itself has “endured several substantial episodes of construction, conservation, reconstruction, destruction, and reuse” and is currently an amalgam of a number of different interpretive approaches. Recently a conservation plan for the Separate Prison was drawn up with the goal of assessing the significance of this building and re-evaluating its interpretation by examining how “significance and values are related to specific fabric interventions.” It was ultimately decided that for several areas within the prison, reconstruction of lost material was preferable to the maintenance of original fabric in a ruined state. For example, the conservation plan calls for the reconstruction of the walls that historically separated the exercise yards and which are currently partially or completely missing. This decision was based on the idea that the significance of the site lies primarily in the emphasis that was placed on isolation and that the best way to convey this significance is to recreate a setting that allows visitors to experience the prison as the inmates would have experienced it while they were incarcerated there. Likewise, the conservation plan determined that some areas of the Separate Prison that had been reconstructed in previous decades should be largely left as they are. Among these is the Chapel, which occupies the southern wing of the Separate Prison and which was completely reconstructed during the 1970s. Although parts of the reconstruction are inaccurate and consideration is being given to re-reconstruct certain features that do not conform to the original design, overall,

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 29.
it was decided that the reconstructed Chapel “enable[s] many visitors to gain a kinetic and spatial sense of the degree to which isolation was enforced.”8

A decision to leave the synagogue as a stabilized ruin, conserving only when necessary, clearly has precedent throughout much of the rest of the prison. Presenting sites in this way minimizes if not eliminates conjectural interventions, and uses the existing physical decay as a theatrical gesture, representing distance between the past and the present by showing the dramatic effects of the encroachment of nature. At the same time, the ability to recognize tangible evidence, amidst the ruins, that the site was once a place of human activity, can have the opposing effect of connecting one to the past. Even further, a sense of sympathy can be evoked when the site as one imagines it once looked is contrasted with the reality of its current condition. One could even say that this juxtaposition might be especially poignant for a site that represents the effort made by a small group of people to help create their own space for religious worship within the walls of a prison.

By taking a minimal intervention approach, however, one is essentially conveying the notion that it is the physical fabric of the site that should be valued above all else. The physical fabric of the synagogue certainly retains a degree of significance. After all, the decoration of the interior space is at least partly attributed to the voluntary labor of the Jewish inmates. The value of preserving the absolute integrity of this fabric, however, is not as important as the presentation of the site as it looked while it was in use by the inmates. Such an effect could be achieved through selective restoration and

reconstruction. This interpretive technique would enable visitors to most easily relive part of the Jewish inmates’ experience without having to rely too extensively on their imaginations. More importantly, the presentation of the site in this way emphasizes many of the characteristics that are key to its significance namely, that it was a communal space, a Jewish place of worship within a prison, that it was the product of both volunteers from the Jewish community and the Jewish inmates themselves, that it was continually modified over many years, and that it demonstrates a degree of care and attention that went into creating a beautiful sanctuary (literally and figuratively) within the gloomy stone corridors of Eastern State.

Unfortunately, there are a number of complications inherent in doing restorations and reconstructions. By definition, the term restoration refers to the repair of “existing components.”9 Due to the extensive damage within the synagogue, however, it would be virtually impossible to interpret the synagogue as a whole without employing some degree of reconstruction as well. According to the Burra Charter, reconstruction differs from restoration in that it involves the, “introduction of materials (new or old) into the fabric.”10 In the case of the synagogue, this would mean removing portions of the original fabric that are damaged beyond repair (for example, some of the plywood elements and nearly all of the ceiling and wall plaster) and replacing them with sound material. The replacement of a large percentage of original fabric necessarily diminishes the authenticity of a site and is generally not recommended. It can be acceptable, however, in

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10 Australia ICOMOS, Burra Charter: Article 1.8.
a case such as the Eastern State synagogue where the value of presenting the site as a whole trumps the value of the actual historic fabric.

Additionally, by definition, to “restore” something is to return it “to a known earlier state by removing accretions or by reassembling existing components.”11 Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence from any one period in the history of the synagogue to ensure that the restoration would be based on what actually existed and not on suppositions and conjecture. Even the three photographs from the late 1950s and early 1960s – the most concrete evidence that has been discovered as to what the synagogue interior looked like during a specific time period – only show the eastern end of the room. To base a reconstruction on this evidence would entail an inappropriate degree of guesswork as to what the rest of the synagogue looked like at this time. More importantly, even if there was a sufficient amount of evidence documenting what the synagogue looked like during various periods of time, the question then becomes how does one determine which “earlier state” the site should be restored to. In contrast to a site where, for example, a famous person lived for a certain period of time, much of the significance of the synagogue derives from its evolution over time. Restoring this site to one particular period would erase the very “accretions” – the layers of paint, the various campaigns of plaster, etc. – that are evidence of the continuous effort that was made by an evolving group of inmates and philanthropists to maintain and beautify the synagogue. For this reason, the restoration of the synagogue should be done in such a way that selectively reveals portions of this palimpsest.

11 Australia ICOMOS, Burra Charter: Article 1.7.
An interpretive plan for the synagogue at Eastern State should be divided into “Physical Intervention Measures” and “Additional Interpretive Measures.” The physical intervention should be done in a way that best reflects the significance of the site, namely the reinstatement of the overall space while maintaining the palimpsest of alterations. Other interpretive techniques should be employed in order to help clarify the site’s significance and to help relate this significance to the overall history of Eastern State.

**PHYSICAL INTERVENTION MEASURES**

- Complete removal of the debris that currently covers nearly every surface.
- Removal of the debris that currently covers the entire floor. By reinstating a space that allows for free movement and can accommodate a considerable number of people, visitors can congregate within the synagogue and contrast this experience with the solitude and confinement they may have felt when entering one of the individual cells at Eastern State. Obviously, because this “debris” is actually the collapsed ceiling, great care must be taken to a) recover and objects that may be buried under or embedded within the layers of plaster and other materials and b) carefully document these layers and record any evidence regarding structural or decorative features of the old ceiling.
- Restoration of the room as a finished space through the reconstruction of both the wall and ceiling plaster. Select portions of these surfaces should be left in their current state in order to exhibit/reveal the various layers of mortar, lath, plaster, and paint.
• Preservation of the existing decorative plaster molding and reconstruction of missing portions. Although this intervention is favoring one period of the synagogue’s history over another, the preservation of the decorative plaster is important because it demonstrates that, even in light of the impending closure of the penitentiary, someone found the money and saw the need to continue beautifying the synagogue.

• Preservation of the existing paint fragments, specifically the remnants of bright blue paint that are evident along the plaster cornice above the Torah Ark and along portions of the plywood wainscoting. Additionally, the various layers of peeling and cracking paint that currently cover portions of the metal heating pipes should not be scraped off but left as is.

• Restoration and reconstruction of the damaged Torah Ark doors and replacement of the doors onto the Ark.

• Reconstruction of the decorative elements of the Torah Ark (including the Torah curtain, Eternal light, and plaque inscribed with the Ten Commandments) based on their appearance in historic photographs.

• Restoration and reconstruction of the plywood benches and wainscoting. Along the northern wall these elements are basically damaged beyond repair. Completely reconstructing these elements would not only reinstate the interior aesthetic, the use of entire new material would enable visitors to experience sitting in the synagogue without the risk of damaging original fabric. At the same time, because the bench and wainscoting along the southern wall are relatively intact, these could be restored and designated as “off-limits” to visitors.
• Maintenance of the back portion of the synagogue as a stabilized ruin. The fact that the purpose of this space is unknown should not be hidden but rather presented as an opportunity for visitors to surmise as to what its function may have been. Additionally, leaving this space in its current state can be used as means of interpreting the later history of the synagogue – namely the period after Eastern State closed during which neglect, vandalism, and nature caused extensive damage to the site.

ADDITIONAL INTERPRETIVE MEASURES

• Creation of a more in-depth discussion of the Jewish inmate experience at Eastern State, and the evolution and significance of the synagogue for incorporation into the current audio guide.

• Creation of a discussion of how the significance of the synagogue relates to the entire history of the prison for incorporation into the current audio guide. This discussion can include 1) Identification of other places and activities within the prison that are emblematic of the changes that took place after the abolition of solitary confinement such as the baseball field, the workshops, and the production of an inmate-run newspaper. 2) Recognition of other minority groups within the prison and how their experience may have been distinct from that of the average prisoner. African-American inmates, for example, were housed in segregated cellblocks until 1961.\textsuperscript{12} 3) Identification of other sites within the prison that

illustrate the importance of religion such as the chapel in the Industrial Building and the Catholic Chaplain’s Office.  

- Installation, in an unobtrusive location, of signage that provides supplemental information to the audio guide. Signage can include reproductions of historic photographs of the synagogue interior. These photographs will give the visitor an overall sense of what the synagogue looked like just prior to the closing of the prison. The photographs can also be used as a means of comparing what the synagogue looked like before and after the installation of the decorative plaster and to illustrate the different wall fixtures that were once in place. Additionally, because the photographs depict Jewish inmates inside the synagogue, these images would help with visitors’ perception of the site as a place of human activity. Other signage could include reproductions of selective primary documents. For example, excerpts from a radio speech given by William Portner in 1933 in which he stated, “Society…can only redeem itself entirely if it will continue its efforts to rehabilitate the offender in the spirit of, ‘I am my brother’s keeper,’” can be used to exemplify the responsibility some of the volunteers felt for aiding their fellow Jews.

- Development of programming, such as a lecture series, that addresses issues relating to the synagogue and the Jewish inmate experience at Eastern State.

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13 Although the Catholic Chaplain’s Office can be viewed through the glass panes of the office door, preservation work needs to be done before the site can be opened for public visitation. Unfortunately, the Industrial Building is severely deteriorated and this structure is currently off-limits to visitors. Both of these sites are currently in need of further historic research.

14 Reconstruction of the wall fixtures would be inappropriate as there are two clear examples of types that have existed and there is no basis for establishing that one is more significant than the other.

15 “Rehabilitating the Criminal Offender,” transcript of radio address by William Portner, 19 February 1933, personal papers of Dr. Jay Portner.
As mentioned, the terminology used in this thesis to describe the physical intervention measures follows the definitions outlined in the Burra Charter. However, Eastern State is a National Historic Landmark and, as such, it falls under the jurisdiction of the United States Department of the Interior. It is therefore important to note that the recommended physical intervention measures for the synagogue qualify under the Secretary of the Interior Standards as “preservation,” which is defined by that governing body as:

The act or process of applying measures necessary to sustain the existing form, integrity, and materials of an historic property. Work, including preliminary measures to protect and stabilize the property, generally focuses upon the ongoing maintenance and repair of historic materials and features rather than extensive replacement and new construction.\(^{16}\)

It is also important to note that every effort should be made to make these physical interventions reversible. Unfortunately, because of the severely deteriorated state of the physical fabric, it may be impossible to restore the synagogue in a way that is completely reversible. It is therefore essential that the site be fully documented in its current condition before any restoration effort is undertaken.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Any interpretive plan for the synagogue should take into account that the need for revisions will almost certainly arise if it becomes clear that the interpretation is not adequately conveying the significance of the site to visitors or if additional historical or physical evidence is uncovered that necessitates a reassessment of the cultural significance of the site. Indeed, although an effort was made to investigate the synagogue as extensively as possible, the time frame of this project has left many unanswered questions and many unexplored avenues and topics for further research. Among these are:

Newspapers – Aside from *The Umpire* and the *Eastern Echo* (which were only circulated within Eastern State and are therefore not published newspapers but rather historic documents), the only newspaper utilized for historic research was the *Jewish Exponent*. The Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, from which this source was obtained, does not have any issues of the *Exponent* dating later than 1955. Additionally, of the issues in that collection, only those published in the fall and spring were used. It is likely that considerable information could be found by looking through issues of the *Exponent* that were published throughout the rest of the year as well as issues that cover the years between 1955 and 1971. Further research can also be done using other Jewish and non-Jewish newspapers published in Philadelphia.
Annual Reports – The Annual Reports used for researching this thesis were largely those covering the years between the late 1880s and the early 1940s. The latter date was determined by the fact that no Annual Reports were found (either at the Eastern State Archives or the State Archives in Harrisburg) from after 1942. The former date, however, was chosen partially because a cursory investigation of reports from the early to mid 19th century did not yield significant information about Jewish activity within Eastern State and partially because of time constraints. It would be beneficial for a more thorough investigation of all Annual Reports to be conducted. From the research that was done for this thesis, statistics about the Jewish inmate population were only found in reports for the years 1924-1942. However, early Annual Reports provide lists of newly convicted inmates and the crimes that they committed. Though potentially inaccurate, it would be possible to use these lists to speculate which of the inmates were Jewish based on their last names and thereby gain a rough sense of what the Jewish population was at Eastern State during a given year. By the same method, the information about the crimes that were committed by each incoming prisoner could be used in an attempt to determine any patterns in the types of crimes that Jews were historically incarcerated for at Eastern State.

Historic records of B’nai B’rith Liberty Region – The Philadelphia regional office of B’nai B’rith possess an extensive archive of historical documents. Unfortunately, these documents are currently not organized and time did not afford the luxury of sorting through them to look for relevant information. It is highly possible that significant information about the Prison Aid Committee could be found within this collection.
Interviews – Further investigation could be done in order to locate individuals with first, second, or even third-hand connections to Eastern State who might have information or documents relating to the synagogue, the Jewish inmates, or the volunteers. 1) Dr. Jay Portner could be interviewed again to gather names of people (or their children) whom William Portner worked with, 2) an attempt could be made to contact any living relatives of Joseph Paull or any of the numerous individuals mentioned in the Jewish Exponent and other sources who volunteered to assist the Jewish inmates at Eastern State but who were not researched for this paper, and 3) an attempt could be made to contact relatives of the wardens who presided over Eastern State.

The State Correctional Institution at Graterford – Preliminary inquiries about whether any artifacts currently located at the Graterford synagogue had been transferred from Eastern State when it closed in 1971. The only connection made was the existence of the plaques dedicated to William Portner, Bernice Watman, and Joseph Paull. Further research could be done as to what else, if anything, was once part of the Eastern State synagogue. Additionally, interviews could be conducted with current Jewish inmates at Graterford to determine if any of them spent time at Eastern State or have any knowledge of the prison’s synagogue.

Eastern State Penitentiary Oral History Project – One of the most puzzling documents uncovered while researching the Eastern State synagogue was the transcript of a 1994
We built a new synagogue there for the small number of Jewish inmates. And Joe Paul (sic) was a Jewish industrialist you might say in Philadelphia, and Al Fraser, I think he was in the manufacturing business, and they supplied all of the materials, and we went into the place and tore out the partitions between two rooms and built a synagogue that was, reflected their religion on the inside. The decoration and so on. It was a job well done which I think they appreciated.¹

According to Rundle’s recollection, the synagogue that exists today was not actually created until the early to mid 1960s. This notion was basically dismissed because it contradicts with other historical evidence. However, further historical and physical investigation might prove that until the 1960s, the Jewish inmates actually worshiped in an entirely different location.

As stated in the Burra Charter, the cultural significance of a site may change not only as the result of new information, but also “as a result of the continuing history of the place.”² The continuing history of the synagogue is marked by the current effort of individuals from the Jewish community who have banded together to fund the conservation of the site. On one hand, this gesture serves to enrich the significance of the synagogue as a place that is representative of philanthropy within the Jewish community. However, there is some interest among these individuals in not only conserving the

synagogue, but also reestablishing it as a viable place of worship. If this happens, a shift in the cultural significance of the synagogue will certainly occur – from a place that is valued for the story that it represents, to a place where that story will continue to evolve.
Fig. 1. Location of synagogue indicated on current plan of Eastern State Penitentiary, from “Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Structures Report.”
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Fig. 56 *Below*, ceiling lights behind partition wall, photographs by the author, 2004.
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