

120-Year-Old Touro Is Rich In History

Synagogue Grew Up With City

BY PAUL KALMAN

To thousands of citizens who pass every day in front of its ornate doors, Touro Synagogue is just another attractive place of worship on St. Charles Ave.

Few of them know that with the high holiday season just past, the synagogue completed 120 years of existence.

Since it practically grew up with the city, the synagogue can boast that it is the oldest Jewish congregation in New Orleans and the entire Mississippi valley.

By virtue of the same fact, the synagogue's intriguing history runs closely parallel to, and at times even intermingles with, the history of the city.

As almost everyone is aware, the synagogue takes its name from Judah Touro, the great philanthropist and benefactor, who came to New Orleans from Boston in 1802. Touro was the son of a rabbi who emigrated to this country from West Indies.

Tradition tells that Judah Touro fell in love with his cousin, Catherine Hayes, but her father would not permit them to marry because of their close relationship. Young Touro decided to leave New England and start life anew in a distant part of the country.

He was impressed with the commercial possibilities of New Orleans which was a small, unattractive town of 8000 inhabitants. Although he was virtually penniless when he came here, Touro managed to open a general merchandise store which he eventually parlayed into a gigantic shipping enterprise.

During the War of 1812, Touro fought under Andrew Jackson at Chalmette and almost died of gunshot wounds. After the war he re-entered the shipping field and continued his phenomenal success.

In 1828 a group of German Jews in New Orleans founded the Congregation Gates of Mercy. Fifteen

years later the Spanish-Portugese Jewish community organized the Congregation Dispersed of Judah. Judah Touro contributed to the support of both groups for which he eventually was honored in 1881 when the two congregations joined forces to form the Touro Synagogue.

Touro's charity was confined to no one race or creed. A prominent example of his broadminded spirit made itself evident when Touro once noticed that the First Congregational Church was about to lost its edifice because of financial reverses. Touro bought the building at public auction and gave it back to its former owners with no compensation, refusing at the same time the many tempting offers of others for the property.

About two weeks before his death in 1854, Touro executed his famous will which provided liberally for Jewish, Protestant and Catholic charities. There were bequests for six Christian orphan asylums in New Orleans, including St. Anna's, St. Mary's and the Catholic Boys' Asylum, in addition to the Milne Asylum and the Touro-Shakspeare Home.

He was also the leading light and the principal contributor to the foundation of the Touro Infirmary.

Touro Synagogue occupied several buildings during the course of its colorful history. Before the two original congregations welded themselves into the present-day organization, one was located on N. Rampart St. The immediate predecessor of the latest synagogue is the impressive building on Carondelet St. which has recently housed the Knights of Columbus, and the Colonial Auditorium.

The Touro congregation is composed of reformed Jews who were under the leadership of Rabbi Emil Leipziger until Jan. 1 of this year. Rabbi Leipziger

took over the pulpit in 1914 and was a powerful factor in sustaining and building the synagogue to the eminent place it holds today in American Judaism. In addition to his religious work, Rabbi Leipziger is equally well-known for his civic efforts, among which is the part he played in helping to found the Community Chest.

On his 70th birthday and after 34 years of faithful service, Rabbi Leipziger handed over the reins of authority to Rabbi Leo A. Bergman, a brilliant young minister, who earned a handsome reputation before coming here for his doctrines of tolerance and brotherhood.

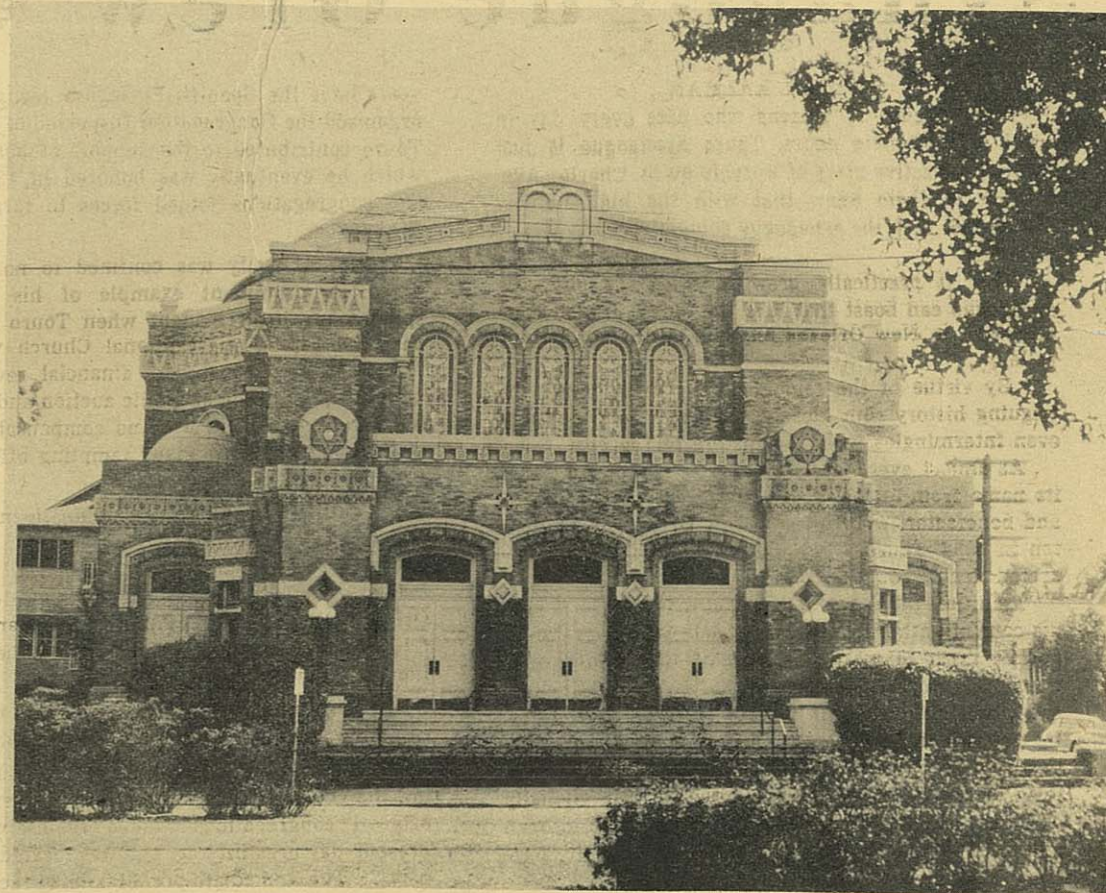
During the 12 months Rabbi Bergman has been in New Orleans, membership in Touro Synagogue has become the biggest in its history. Its Sunday school is among the most modern in the country and serves as a model for rabbis setting up Sunday schools in new congregations.

The newly organized Touro Men's Club, Rabbi Bergman's newest pet, presents regular programs featuring outstanding public figures such as Rabbi Louis Binstock and Rev. Fr. Edward Murphy.

The youth group of Touro Synagogue has doubled its membership since reorganizing a year ago and has adopted a program of regular social affairs. Its latest project was a discussion series which met at Rabbi Bergman's home to study preparation for marriage.

Other new and varied activities are still in the planning stage. They will be developed during the coming season.

Rabbi Bergman hopes that eventually Touro Synagogue will be able to offer every one of its members some phase of interest in activities in which they may find pleasure and companionship as well as fulfillment and inspiration.



TOURO SYNAGOGUE