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## Pittsfield: Jewish life on the western frontier (of Massachusetts)

By Carol Goodman Kaufman  
Advocate correspondent

Perhaps the earliest reference to a Jew in Pittsfield was way back in 1815, when it was reported that a boy, clearing employer Joseph Merrick's Fort Hill yard of rubbish, dug up a set of *tefillin*. Ensuing press coverage about the find caused quite a stir across the country, and clergy and scholars flocked to Pittsfield to examine the parchment scrolls enclosed in their leather boxes. At that time, many people believed that Native Americans were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel, and they were convinced that the *tefillin* had been dropped by an ancient Israelite who perhaps had traveled across the Bering Strait or by boat across the Atlantic.

An article with the Agatha Christie ish title "The Case of the Missing Philactery" by William N. Goetzmann reports that the *tefillin* were donated to the [American Antiquarian Society in Worcester](#) on condition that the scholars there publish an article about them. The Society failed to produce one, so the *tefillin* were sent to a [New Jersey](#) scholar, Elias Boudinot. Upon Boudinot's death, his heirs donated his papers to Yale University, but the *tefillin* were not among them. They have not been seen since. Meanwhile, the first significant group of Jews to take up permanent residence in the factory and mill town in [Berkshire County](#) were German peddlers in 1857. Among them were Moses and Louis England, and Joseph R. Newman. The England Brothers Department

Store reigned over North Street for decades with its escalator and operator-run elevators and all manner of offerings, from clothing to cosmetics, candy to Scout

### Where's the story?

9 Points Mentioned

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### Where's the story?

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- Shouldn't have accepted.
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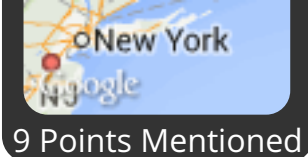






The England Brothers store was a local landmark.

supplies. I can still hear the bell signaling the pneumatic tubes transporting money back and forth from various departments to the back offices.



The peddlers were followed by all manner of craftsmen and provision dealers. Then, toward the

end of the 19th century, a wave of Eastern European and Russian immigrants fleeing pogroms joined their co-religionists in multi-family homes in the northwest quadrant of the downtown area. My grandparents were among the latter group to arrive, and they fit the profile. Max and Fannie Goodman operated a grocery store and deli, and Bubby Sarah Deborah Katz ran a provisions store while Zaydie Louis taught *heder*, where tuition cost a dollar a week.

As Jews became more prosperous, many moved to the east side of town, while others moved further west. By 1930, over half of Pittsfield's Jews were involved in trade, 25% were clerical workers, about 13% were factory workers, while fewer than 3% were manufacturers.

Of the city's synagogues, the Temple Anshe Amonim (now Amunim) was founded first, in 1869, and was the fourth oldest congregation in the Northeast. In 1882, the society occupied rooms at the corner of North and Fenn Streets. In 1904 the temple affiliated with the Reform movement. Knesses Israel (KI) followed in in 1893 as an Orthodox shul, catering to the needs of the more religiously rigorous Eastern European Jews. However, at the instigation of lay cantor Dr. Kenneth Goldblum, a Conservative congregation sprouted, and the subgroup moved to the [Jewish Community Center](#) on [East Street](#). KI moved to [Wendell Avenue](#) in 1954, and ultimately to [Colt Road](#) in 1974. The name changed to the more modern, Sephardic Knesset Israel around this time. (This writer was the first bride to be married in the [Colt Road](#) building.)

Despite their differences in observance, it was the Reform temple that helped the other congregations to get established. This spirit of cooperation and collaboration continued with the building of the Pittsfield Hebrew Alliance. The facility on Robbins Avenue was the first incarnation of a [Jewish Community Center](#), a building designed for the express purpose of serving every organization in town.

The community continued to grow, and in 1944 purchased a residence at 235 [East Street](#) to serve as the [Jewish Community Center](#). The cornerstone, still visible today, was laid in 1951. In its heyday, the Center was the place to be. The building housed a nursery school, the Community Hebrew School, Boy and Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, the Federation, and an assortment of classes, including arts and crafts, sports, and ballroom dancing.. The building still stands, now occupied by a church.

Today, Pittsfield offers a host of Jewish educational and cultural activities, particularly during the summer months. These include the Jewish Film Festival series, concerts, named lectures, visiting scholars, rabbi-led study sessions, and creative collaborations with local cultural institutions such as the Hancock Shaker Village and the Tanglewood Music Festival.

Pittsfield's Jewish community may be small in numbers – only 4,000 by most recent count – but the cultural and religious life is full and robust.

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