

Portsmouth, N.H., offers historic architecture - and Jewish history

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Poet laureate Donald Hall's Caldecott Award-winning *Ox-Cart Man* ignited my love of Portsmouth, New Hampshire as I read it to my children. In addition to telling a wonderful story, the book featured beautiful illustrations of a long-gone pastoral life and a charming New England town. Luckily for us, the real people of Portsmouth understood the importance of their architectural heritage and have preserved much of that for visitors to enjoy. In recognition of the restoration, the National Trust for Historic Preservation has designated the city as one of the Dozen Distinctive Destinations in the country.

Due to its strategic location on a river and a harbor, Portsmouth was once one of the nation's busiest ports and shipbuilding cities. In fact, the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard was the first federal navy yard in the country. Famed naval hero, John Paul Jones ("I have not yet begun to fight") boarded nearby and the house in which he stayed now houses the Portsmouth Historical Society Museum.

With the riches accumulated during the port's heyday, the city's wealthy class erected fine buildings. Visitors to this town by the river can see examples of Colonial, Georgian, and Federal style architecture.

These buildings have survived in large part due regulations enacted after a devastating fire in the early 19th century that claimed hundreds of buildings. All new construction required brick and slate. Well before any Europeans ever set foot on what is now New Hampshire, Native American tribes lived and thrived there. The first known European to explore the area came in 1603, followed by English settlers in 1630. Portsmouth was then called Strawberry Banke, after the wild red berries growing along the riverbank. At the town's incorporation in 1653, it was renamed Portsmouth in honor of the colony's founder, one John Mason, captain of the British port of Portsmouth. A century later, Paul Revere rode into town to warn that the British were coming, but this time the Redcoats were not to be honored.

Jews didn't settle in Portsmouth until about 1780, when one couple, Abraham and Rachel Isaac, arrived from Prussia. Like many Jewish immigrants at the time, Isaac became a retailer. Although the Isaacs were religiously observant, they were the only Jews in town.

Consequently, their only son intermarried and moved away. That story repeated itself over the next fifty years or so when the few Jews who came from Germany also assimilated or left town.

By the late 19th century, however, there was a small group of about sixteen Jewish families that wanted to maintain their heritage. They recruited others to join them and, by the turn of the century, the census had almost doubled.

In 1905, Morris Port moved to Portsmouth and led the formation of a group that elected officers and raised money to rent a room for religious services. They dubbed themselves the Temple of Israel. In short order they hired a religious leader, established a Jewish cemetery (still in use today), and purchased a building to be used as a synagogue. The building, only a block from the immigrant Puddle Dock neighborhood, was converted from its use as a Methodist church in 1912, and its opening was celebrated by a parade with the Navy Band and speeches by dignitaries. The Jewish population had grown by this point to thirty-eight families that supported two kosher butchers, a bakery, and three Jewish grocery stores.

Although Portsmouth has a population of only about 21,000, the town offers a wide range of attractions, from the cultural to the recreational. One must-see for visitors wanting to learn about Portsmouth's history is the Strawberry Banke Museum. This living history museum consists of forty-two buildings dating from 1695 to 1950, including houses, shops, and wharves.

The Jewish immigrant experience is highlighted at the museum's Shapiro House. At the turn of the twentieth century, immigrants from Ireland, England, Canada, Italy, Poland, and Russia lived in and around the Puddle Dock neighborhood, where housing was affordable. Among those newcomers were Jewish immigrants Abraham and Sarah Shapiro. "*Becoming Americans: The Shapiro Story, 1898-1928*" features the family's fully furnished home, and their story is a fair representation of the lives lived not only by the 30 Jewish families living in Puddle Dock at the time, but of every immigrant group to arrive in this country.

Across the street, on the banks of the Piscataqua River, sits Prescott Park. Extensive flower gardens and demonstration plots attract thousands of visitors every summer. The flowers also provide a beautiful backdrop to the annual Prescott Park Arts Festival in July and August, where musical and theatrical performances entertain the crowds. Less than a mile away, a piece of both the town's ship-building history is on display in the USS Albacore. The Albacore was one of the most advanced submarines built before the atomic era, and was the prototype for modern submarines. Tours of the sub are available year-round.

For scenery, Peirce Island, a 27-acre riverfront property, offers walking trails connecting five waterfront overlooks, as well as a city-operated boat launch. The island's history includes a role in both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, as the site of Fort Washington.

Luckily for us, Portsmouth is just a short drive from here, a straight shot north on I-95.

To donate or become a member, go to: www.strawberrybanke.org.

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The Shapiro House – how Jews in Portsmouth lived in 1919.
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