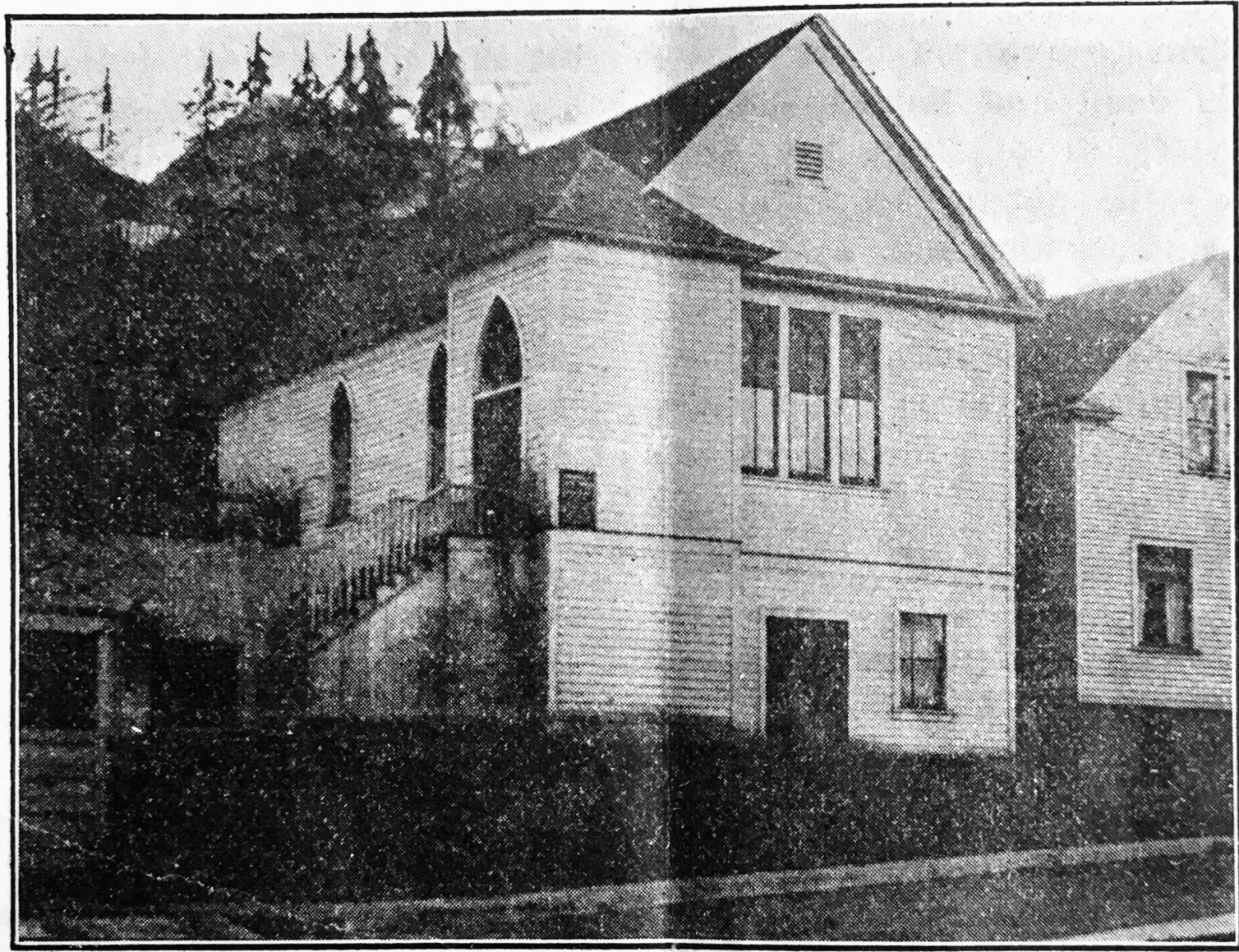


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The Memorial English Lutheran Church building in 1917, which later became a synagogue in Astoria.

HIDDEN HISTORIES

Astoria once had its own synagogue

By JAIME LUMP
For The Astorian

Historical records explain that due to an overlap dispute between two donation land claim surveys, 13th Street didn't get written in, but if you look at a map of the neighborhood behind downtown Astoria, you will see a distinct bend where 13th Street exists, but does not exist.

Historical records and the artifacts can only tell us so much about a time and place. Without proper evidence, stories are sometimes just forgotten.

Older maps of Astoria show that at the bend on Grand Avenue, where 13th is but isn't, there was once a synagogue.

Sometime around 1904, the simple, single-story building was originally constructed as a church for Astoria's German Lutherans.

In 1908, a new English-speaking congregation, the Memorial English Lutheran Church, formed and two years later, the church was rebuilt to give it "a more attractive and home-like appearance." Specifically, it was moved back 16 feet and raised 9 feet to make room for a Sunday School, with a 10-foot addition. The edifice was dedicated with "several musical selections rendered by some of Astoria's best talent." Invitation was extended to the general public. Sitting on the building council for these structural changes was one of Astoria's well-known architects, John Wicks, who later went on to design Trinity Lutheran Church at 16th and Franklin to where the Memorial Lutheran congregation eventually moved in the early 1930s as part of a merger with the Swedish First Lutheran Church that once stood at 35th and Franklin.

The former Memorial English Lutheran Church did not sit empty for long. In 1934, the building became the temporary home to the Astoria Labor Temple, then for about two years, it housed the Assembly of God Church with Reverend Orin D. Channer.

What is so exceptional about this church, that was demolished about 50 years ago and practically forgotten, however, is that it was the site of Astoria's only synagogue.

Despite the scarce records of local Jewish history, there is evidence that Astoria has been home to Jewish residents since as far back as the 1840s. In fact, throughout the years, there were multiple businesses owned by Jewish families and Astorians had elected three prominent and popular Jewish mayors.

One important document exists within a slim manila folder in files found in the Clatsop County Heritage Museum archives.

It provides a record of a group called the Astoria Jewish Council who signed Articles of Incorporation on June 4, 1942. Their objective was to develop a means and ways for members and their families to have a social advantage and clear relationship to one another in order to improve connections within the community.

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Their assets included a building, 569 Grand Ave., which sits across the street from the synagogue site, and \$400. The document was signed by Max Weinstein, president; Carrie See, vice-president; Jerome A. Greenberg, secretary; and Ida Weinstein, treasurer. The board of trustees consisted of Maxwell J. Greenberg, Louis Friedman and Samuel S. Shaman. Future members included Mary Steinbock, and her husband, Harry Steinbock, who was mayor of Astoria from 1959 to 1973, Ann and Milton Berenson, Henry and Sylvia Kramer, Lester and Sybil Crohn, among others. Polk City Directories later show the Astoria Jewish Council and Beth Israel Congregation at 596 Grand Ave. (later 1285 Grand), the site of the synagogue.

There was never a designated rabbi, but the synagogue still became a popular meeting spot, especially for Jewish servicemen stationed at nearby military bases.

Upstairs, you would have found the sanctuary. Downstairs was a meeting room for social gatherings. In the summer of 1949, the synagogue, "decorated with tall baskets of white gladioli, five-point candelabra and white satin pew bows was filled to over-flowing" for a wedding ceremony between Leo Siegel and Elizabeth Solonsky, daughter of Reuben Solonsky, who served as Beth Israel Temple president in the '50s. The wedding, with over 200 guests, "was performed by Rabbi Kleinman... in accordance to the Jewish rites."

Despite its popularity, the synagogue eventually began to see a decline in membership, which could have been partly due to the disbanding of military bases, Jewish Astorians moving away or loss of enthusiasm from a general assimilation of Jewish culture. After 1963, the Beth Israel Congregation is no longer listed in the Polk City Directories and its address, 1285 Grand Ave., remained vacant until 1973, a probable year that the synagogue was demolished.

Since then, Jewish Astorians have congregated here and there. Occasional Passover events took place at the First Presbyterian Church in the '80s.

For a short time, a new congregation, Beit Salmon, which was founded by Ann Goldeen in 2014, was meeting at Peace Lutheran Church's Fellowship Hall, but did not endure after her untimely death only two years later. Many continue to get together and celebrate in their homes.

Today, the site of the synagogue is an overgrown lot with a driveway that leads up to a duplex built sometime in the 1990s.

Looking at it, where the road bends in the place 13th Street is but isn't, how would anyone ever know this church, this synagogue, existed.

Very few photographs are available and stories about it are difficult to find.

Even so, preserving what is known is essential to helping us better understand Astoria's history and heritage.

Jaime Lump is the administrative assistant for Lower Columbia Preservation Society in Astoria.