

## American Jews' Story Told in a New Home

By [JULIA M. KLEIN](#)



The exterior of the National Museum of American Jewish History. *Jeff Goldberg*

### *Philadelphia*

The narrative begins inauspiciously in 1654 with the arrival of 23 Jewish settlers in New Amsterdam, whose governor, Peter Stuyvesant, greeted them as "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ." It ends triumphantly, with an "Only in America" Hall of Fame touting the achievements of Jonas Salk, Estée Lauder, Leonard Bernstein and 15 other American Jews.

The formation of Jewish-American identity is one of the great themes of the new \$150 million, 100,000-square-foot National Museum of American Jewish History. So is the pursuit of both freedom and success—a storyline shared by other immigrants to American shores.

Originally created for Philadelphia's 1976 Bicentennial celebration, the Jewish museum has moved a half-block south, to a metaphorically resonant location near the heart of Independence Mall. Overlooking the Liberty Bell and the President's House, with views of both Independence Hall and the National Constitution Center, the museum explores how Jews both experienced and helped shape America's progress toward its own ideals.

The building design by Polshek Partnership (now Ennead Architects) uses interlocking volumes of glass and terra cotta, contrasting fragility with solidity. The hand-painted glass facade is also meant to symbolize transparency and welcome, while the terra cotta evokes historic Philadelphia and the building's red-brick and terra cotta neighbors. The six-level interior is lightened by skylights and an expansive atrium, with glass-stepped staircases that provide easy orientation and access between floors. The openness of these spaces contrasts with the dimly lit, cramped and noisy galleries containing the bulk of the core exhibition.

Both architecture and exhibition mirror the tension in the museum's mission, between full-throated celebration and careful delineation of the challenges American Jews have faced—both to their identity as Jews and their citizenship in the U.S.

Designed by Gallagher & Associates, with Josh Perelman, the museum's deputy director of exhibitions, programs and collections, as curator, the core exhibition is mostly chronological, as well as dense and historically nuanced. Its ambitious narrative sprawls across 3½ floors and dozens of individual galleries, some too narrow to accommodate weekend crowds.

The design philosophy here can be summed up as "more is more." Crammed with small artifacts, images and labels, the show also employs media extensively, from film clips to (overused) ambient sound. Loud interactive installations add to the tumult. (Headphones would have been an easy fix.) As a result, the show seems lively, but can be challenging—even tedious—to navigate.

The exhibition touches on disparate Jewish communities, from Charleston to San Francisco; individual Jews who have made a mark on American society, from labor organizer Rose Schneiderman to the gangsters Arnold Rothstein and Meyer Lansky; America's ambivalent welcome, and the struggles of Jews to retain, reshape—or, in some cases, cast off—their culture and religion.

Despite their small numbers, Jews have popped up, Zelig-like, throughout American history: They were early settlers and Western pioneers; they fought and died in the Civil War, and every other war; they suffered in the Depression, though not disproportionately; they fled to the suburbs with the rest of the country, and basked in postwar prosperity. In 1948, American Jews welcomed the new state of Israel, and in the 1960s and '70s they embraced social causes from civil rights and feminism to the anti-Vietnam War movement.

Over the centuries, Jews also have quarreled vigorously among themselves about just how Jewish they should be, variously embracing Yiddish newspapers and theater, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, delicatessens, Jewish summer camps, and bar and bat mitzvahs.

The outlines of the story are familiar, but the museum fills in shading and detail. Most visitors will be surprised by Maryland's early 19th-century "Jew Bill," which belatedly awarded Jews the rights of citizens, or Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's General Orders #11, expelling all Jews from the area under his control in a bid to extinguish a black market in cotton. Also highlighted is the so-called Trefa Banquet, a controversial 1883 celebration, in Cincinnati, of Hebrew Union College's

first graduating class of rabbis that featured such nonkosher delicacies as soft-shell crabs, shrimp salad, oysters and frog's legs. A silver oyster fork and a menu are part of the display.

A few artifacts carry real emotional weight, such as civil-rights worker Andrew Goodman's sweet postcard home to his parents ("The people in the city are wonderful and our reception was very good"), shortly before he was murdered in Mississippi in 1964. Or the telegram to Rabbi Stephen Wise in 1942 that alerted him, several months after the Nazis' Wannsee Conference, to the plan it produced to solve Europe's "Jewish question." Other items are merely iconic: Irving Berlin's piano and signed sheet music, Sandy Koufax's signed baseball and pitcher's glove; Steven Spielberg's earliest motion-picture camera.

Some of the media are particularly inventive: A layered interactive exhibit on Western expansion uses a large electronic map to show how Jews helped populate the country. Another casts visitors as immigrants being interrogated at Ellis Island. Yet a third leads them back to the nostalgic world of summer camps.

Vintage film clips of Hollywood moguls, actors and comedians, shown in a small theater, remind us that the heartthrob John Garfield ("The Postman Always Rings Twice") began life as Jacob Julius Garfinkle, and that Sid Caesar used German gibberish to help domesticate memories of the Holocaust. In a replica of a suburban living room, a television shows a scene about intergenerational conflict from Gertrude Berg's sitcom "The Goldbergs," as well as clips of a young Barbra Streisand vocalizing and Sammy Davis Jr. hawking Manischewitz wine.

There are also several displays, including a pioneer wagon, a schoolroom and a tenement bedroom, where children can play house, try on costumes or page through books.

One notable artwork is a light sculpture by Ben Rubin on the museum's top level, visible from outside after dusk. Titled "Beacon," it is an abstract expression of the 5,000 pages of the Talmud, whose laws and commentaries form different shapes on each page. The LED sculpture utilizes seven planes of lights and "flickers" on a cycle that lasts several hours, the artist said in an interview. The work also represents both the flame of the Statue of Liberty and the eternal light that burns in synagogues—perfectly encapsulating the museum's message.

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