

HEBREW REFORM TEMPLE (Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church) HABS No. PA-5517
1433 Thirteenth Avenue
Intown Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS
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7-ALTO.
106-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HEBREW REFORM TEMPLE
(Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church)

HABS No. PA-5517

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PA,
7-ALTO,
106-

Location: 1433 13th Ave. (southeast corner of 15th Street and 13th Avenue), Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: Hebrew Reform Temple is distinguished by its eclectic Moorish exterior, an 1898 design by Altoona's premier architect, Charles M. Robinson. Constructed for the Mountain City Hebrew Reform Congregation, a successor of the Orthodox congregation Adavath Achim, which organized in 1874, the building documents the early spread of reform Judaism beyond this country's major urban centers. In 1924, Altoona's Greek Orthodox community purchased and renovated the structure, renaming it Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church. The building continues to serve as their house of worship and a religious center for a four-county region.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1898. The cornerstone-laying ceremonies took place May 1, 1898; the temple was dedicated September 11, 1898. The building was rededicated as Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in 1924.
2. Architect: C. M. Robinson of Altoona was the architect.
3. Original and subsequent owners: In 1924, the Mountain City Hebrew Reform Congregation sold the property to Anast Notopolous and Charles Miles, on behalf of Altoona's Greek Orthodox congregation, for \$ 37,500. The transaction included three frame houses adjoining the temple on 13th Avenue, which had a total frontage of 70' and a depth of 120'. The houses are no longer extant.
4. Contractor: Orr and Blake, 7th Avenue and 5th Street, Altoona.
5. Original plans and construction: The temple was designed to accommodate a congregation of 300. A smooth-faced aslar band delineates the basement floor, which originally had four Sunday School classrooms.
6. Alterations and additions: The north- and west-facing ogee-arched windows were altered in the late 1960s when stained-glass windows were installed, and several of the flat-arched windows on the ground level have been filled with glass block. Originally, the ogee-arched windows lighting the sanctuary had green glass.¹ The interior of the building has been remodeled several times—in 1924, when the temple changed hands; in 1935 following a fire that damaged the sanctuary; and again in 1955, when part of the balcony was taken down. Also in 1955, canvas murals depicting various saints were mounted on the ceiling of the sanctuary; these are still extant. The ceiling fans in the sanctuary were installed in 1986. An adjacent parish house on 15th Street was demolished in the 1960s.

¹Helen Papadeus, interviews by Nancy Spiegel, Altoona, Pa., summer 1989.

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- B. Historical Context: The Orthodox Jewish congregation, first known as Adavath Achim (Hebrew for brotherly love), was founded in 1874 with twenty-three members. The decision to adopt the Reform liturgy was made in 1877. In 1890 the congregation was reorganized with thirty-eight members and renamed the Mountain City Hebrew Reform Congregation. Members met in homes and rented meeting halls until the temple was completed in 1898. In 1924, the congregation sold the temple and moved to a new site at 3004 Union Ave., reflecting the more general movement of Altoona's population from downtown to the affluent suburban developments of Allegheny Furnace and Llysweu. Since 1922, the congregation has been known as Beth Israel.

The dedication of the reform temple, on September 11, 1898, was an important local event. Attracting an estimated 1,000 people of various denominations, the dedication ceremonies took on the character of a highly-charged political event, as Altoona Rabbi Henry Klein spoke of the significance of the building in terms of world affairs, of passing into a new era. With the Spanish-American War as his point of reference, Klein equated Spanish intolerance in Cuba and the suffering of the Cuban people with the oppression of the Jews in Europe. He saw in the American synagogue, which was "founded in freedom of thought, conscience, and religion," a lasting refuge from tyranny. In a volatile, turn-of-the-century political climate fueled by nativist sentiments and increasing agitation over the role of America in an imperialist war, Rabbi Klein also viewed his dedication address as an opportunity to emphasize the loyalty and patriotism of American Jewry. "The Jew is intensely loyal and patriotic," he stated. "He blesses this government every day for the blessings it bestows, and consecrates his temples in the spirit of the loftiest American principles."² The adaptation of the more accommodating reform liturgy included the introduction of choir music during services, and establishment of a Sunday school. It also required that religious services be conducted in the vernacular, with the exception of a few prayers, and that seating be mixed.

While Altoona's Jewish community grew relatively quickly, the Greek community in Altoona remained small throughout the early twentieth century, consisting of sixty-seven families, and taking in about 500 people. Previous to acquiring the temple, families held religious services in a rented meeting hall in the Shannon building on 11th Avenue. While the new building suited the special needs of the growing congregation, one aspect of its construction was less than ideal --the altar faced east, rather than north.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General statement:

1. Architectural character: Since there is no specifically Hebraic design tradition, many late nineteenth-century congregations turned to adaptations of Byzantine and Moorish architecture for their temples and synagogues. Hebrew Reform Temple's horseshoe- and ogee-pointed arches, and two square towers crowned with onion domes, contribute to such a Moorish aesthetic, while the smooth- and rough-faced ashlar exterior and cross-gabled form point to a particularly local ecclesiastical preference.
2. Condition of fabric: Very good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The two-story stone church measures 53' on 15th Street and 48' on 13th

²"Synagogue is Dedicated," Altoona Morning Tribune (September 12, 1898), 1.

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Avenue.

2. Foundations: Stone.
3. Walls: The exterior has a rough-faced, random-coursed ashlar limestone surface, accented with smooth-faced limestone trim. The cornerstone reads, "Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, 1917," indicating the year the congregation was formed, and not the date of the cornerstone-laying ceremony. The east facade, which faced a row of frame houses, is a blank wall.
4. Structural systems, framing: Stone bearing walls and wood joists.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The primary entrance is on 13th Avenue, through a horseshoe-arched entranceway fitted with wrought-iron grillwork similar to that found on Altoona's Masonic Temple. There are side entrances on the west and south facades. All exterior doors are V-joint, slab doors, painted brown.
 - h. Windows: The ground-floor windows are flat arched, with smooth-faced ashlar lintels and sills. On the second floor, the openings are horseshoe- and ogee-arched; there is also a round-arched window on the south facade to light the stair landing. Upper windows on the street and avenue sides are round.
6. Roof:
 - a. Shape: Cross-gabled roof with new asphalt shingles.
 - b. Towers: There are two square towers crowned by onion domes. The larger tower in the northwest corner has a helfry formed by horseshoe arches below the dome, which is surmounted by a cross. The tower at the southwest corner encloses the stairway.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:
 - a. Basement: The basement consists of a large open hall and a kitchen.
 - b. First: The sanctuary has a hall plan, with the balcony on the west wall.
 - c. Attic: Inaccessible.
2. Stairway: A stairway is located opposite the main entrance and rises along the western wall of the building, with the landing on the south wall. The handsome newel post, turned balusters, and treads are pine.
3. Flooring: The floor of the sanctuary has been covered with wall-to-wall carpet.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All of the walls and ceilings are finished with plaster on lath, except for the basement, which has a drop ceiling and new panelling.

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5. Doorways and doors: All of the interior doors have six rectangular panels and molded surrounds with bull's-eye corner blocks.
6. Mechanical systems:
 - a. Heating: Steam.
 - b. Lighting: The crystal chandelier suspended from the sanctuary ceiling was purchased by the congregation in 1925. Anast Notopolous, a local theater owner and prominent member of the church, was able to acquire the fabulous showpiece through his contacts in the theater industry.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: None located.
- B. Early views: None located.
- C. Interviews: Helen Papadeus, who grew up as a member of the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church. Interviews with Nancy Spiegel, Altoona, Pa., summer 1989.
- D. Bibliography:
 1. Primary sources:

"Cornerstone Laying," Altoona Morning Tribune (May 2, 1898).

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 2. Secondary sources:

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Notopolous, V. A., "The Greek Orthodox Church," in George A. Wolf, ed. Blair County's First Hundred Years: 1846-1946. Hollidaysburg, Pa.: Blair County Historical Society, 1945.

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- E. Additional Sources: Most of the records relating to the Mountain City Hebrew Reform Congregation have been sent to the Hebrew Union College Archives, Cincinnati Ohio--a national repository for the history of reform Judaism in America.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach.