

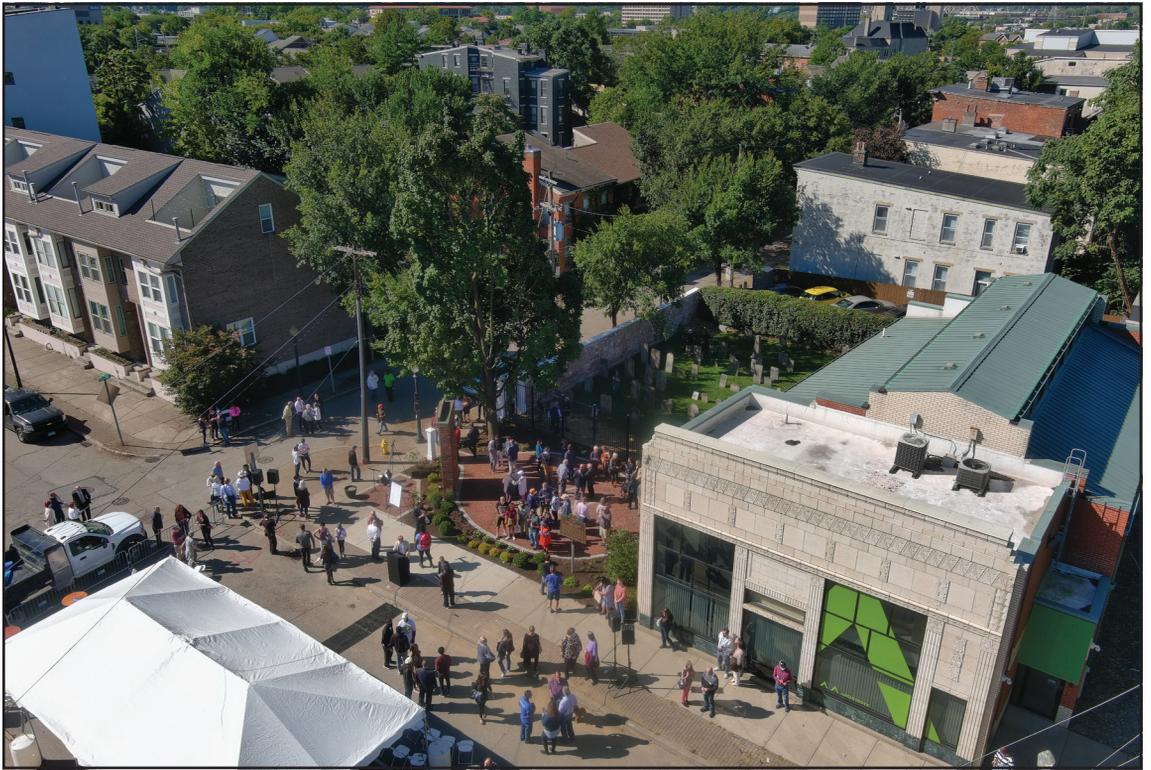
A New Resting Place for the Scattered Sons of Israel

A History of the First Jewish Cemetery West of the Allegheny Mountains

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This special issue of *Ohio Valley History* celebrates two hundred years of Jewish community in Cincinnati. The founding of this community is traced to the 1821 establishment of Chestnut Street Cemetery in the city's West End neighborhood. Per Jewish custom, a cemetery is often the first institution the community establishes. As David Harris, executive director of Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati, explains, "it shows the primacy of the commandment to honor the dead. That if you can't do that, you don't have the makings of a community."¹ All other matters of the religion can be practiced without an organized space, but a cemetery must have land. Strict laws regarding burials and the care of cemeteries form an essential religious and social responsibility. These burial customs also make it necessary to establish a cemetery and avoid the lapse in tradition that would occur if a secular cemetery were the only burial ground available. As Barnett Brickner wrote in his 1935 study of Jewish Cincinnati, "several instances have occurred where deceased persons belonging to our persuasion had died in the Central Hospital, and then been buried without the presence or knowledge even of the Jews, without a brother or sister in faith being present to repeat a prayer, or to do the least office of kindness and affections."² In 1821, when the founders of Cincinnati Jewry discovered that a previously unknown member of their community was dying, establishing a cemetery became a priority.

Joseph Jonas (1792–1869) was the self-professed first permanent Jewish resident of Cincinnati. Jewish traders had visited the area as early as 1814, but none of these travelers seem to have settled in the Ohio Valley.³ Jonas arrived in Cincinnati on March 8, 1817, after spending a cold winter in Pittsburgh waiting for the frozen Ohio River to thaw. He hailed originally from Plymouth, England, which calls to mind the often mythologized original pioneers of America, as he embarked on a similar journey to create "a new resting place for the scattered sons of Israel."⁴ Jonas held quite lofty views of his role in the "Great West." Before emigrating and setting his sights on Cincinnati, much to the disapproval of his family and friends, he read many especially impressive descriptions of the Ohio River in various accounts of America. One Levi Philips wrote of the new world: "In the wilds



In 2021 Cincinnati celebrated the 200th Anniversary of the founding of the Chestnut Street Cemetery in the West End. Celebrants gathered at the new plaza at the corner of Central Avenue and Chestnut Street. Courtesy of Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati.

of America, and entirely amongst gentiles; you will forget your religion and your God.” Such descriptions only seem to have furthered Jonas’s mission: “that he might be a nucleus around whom the first congregation might be formed, to worship the God of Israel in this great western territory.”²⁵ While Jonas quickly established himself as a silversmith and watchmaker, he remained isolated from other Jews except for the occasional visit from traders at the posts of Brookville and Connersville, Indiana, then the westernmost trading posts in American territory.

One of these visitors was David Israel Johnson (1795–1842) who moved to Brookville, Indiana, with his wife and child in 1818 at a brother’s behest. The Johnsons, finding the frontier life in Brookville a little too wild, returned to Cincinnati to stay in 1819. Also arriving in June 1819 were Lewin Cohen, Barnet Levi (d. 1863), and Jonas Levy. This collection of individuals celebrated the High Holidays for the first time in Cincinnati that year. Shortly thereafter, Jonas’s brother Abraham (1801–1864) and his sister and brother-in-law Sarah (1795–1846) and Morris Moses (1792–1860) arrived with a family friend, Philip Symonds (d. 1864). In 1820, a few more residents joined the community: Solomon Buckingham, Moses Nathan, and Solomon Minken. These individuals mark the arrival of the first German Jews to Cincinnati. German Jewish immigrants would make up the majority of those settling in Cincinnati by 1830. In

1821, Solomon Moses (d. 1870), another Portsmouth, England, family member joined their ranks. With their arrival, Jewish Cincinnatians formed the minyan, the quorum of ten adult Jewish males required for certain religious obligations, to establish a formal community of Israel. They purchased a Torah, and Jonas “rejoiced, for the prospects of a permanent congregation were near at hand.”⁶

It was in this context that a dying stranger called on the community, or so the story goes. According to legend, from his deathbed, Benjamin Lape (also recorded as “Leib” and “Laib”), in his seventies and of poor health, asked for the Jewish congregants of the city. Joseph Jonas and Morris Moses arrived, and Lape recounted to them his wish for burial in a Jewish cemetery with full Jewish customs. Lape revealed that he had kept his Jewish heritage hidden during his life in Cincinnati. Arriving at a time when no other Jews resided there, he had married into the Baptist tradition, adopting the faith and raising his children in it.⁷ Lape’s wife had preceded him in death, and his daughters had moved away, so he was free to be his true self once again in death. Jonas and Moses promised to bury him per the Jewish rites, but first they needed land. Joseph Jones, Morris Moses, David Johnson, Moses Nathan, Abraham Jonas, and Solomon Moses purchased twenty-five-by-fifty-foot plot, adjacent to the Betts farm—whose house is now considered the oldest extant structure in Cincinnati—in trust from Nicholas Longworth (1783–1863) for \$75.⁸ Samuel Bruel first recounted the story in 1854, but Rabbi David Philipson’s (1862–1949) 1894 telling is its most popular form.

The last will and testament of Benjamin Lape tells a slightly different story. Lape’s wife, Mary, is listed as an executor, which shows that she was still living when her husband died and was and therefore aware of his Jewish heritage. The second executor is listed as “my friend Joseph Jonas,” which disproves the story that Lape was entirely unknown to the Jewish citizens of Cincinnati. The will continues: “I give and bequeath to Morris Moses of Cincinnati all that certain lot or piece of ground situated in Cincinnati...in special trust for a burying place to be used as such by the Jews who now and or hereafter may be residents of Cincinnati wherein to deposit their dead.” While the property’s exact location is unknown, it was located on Water Street near the Glass House on the city’s western edge. Right along the riverfront and subject to frequent flooding, Water Street would have been a poor location for a cemetery, which possibly led to the purchase of the Chestnut Street property. Finally, Lape left strict instructions about his son’s education: “I direct that my son Benjamin now about fourteen months old shall be educated and brought up after the manner of the Jews and in the Jewish religion.”⁹ The will does not mention any other children, so it is unclear whether he also had adult children who may have moved away before his time of death, as was generally understood. The will was written in May 1821, so Lape may very well have been sick or otherwise aware that he was nearing the end of his life. This is a far cry from a deathbed confession; given the will details,

it seems much more likely that Lape did marry outside of the faith but may have privately practiced Judaism until other members of his community arrived. In 1821, the Jewish minyan was formally established in Cincinnati, and Lape seems to have begun to engage with that community. His wishes for his son's education show that he hoped for this involvement to continue through future generations. Benjamin Lape Jr. married a Christian and was known as a Christian during his life, so it is unclear whether his father's wishes were fulfilled. There is one anecdote of the younger Lape introducing himself to Phineas Moses as "the son of the first to be buried according to Jewish rites," implying a connection with the community and pride in his father, if not an active participant in his own life.¹⁰

There is an additional matter of the timing of Lape's death with regard to the purchase of the Chestnut Street property. Lape's will was recorded into probate on June 28, 1821, suggesting he had died shortly prior. Lape's will is a reproduction created and reissued to probate after the 1880s Hamilton County Courthouse fire damaged or destroyed the original. It is possible, although unlikely, that the reproduction added the term *deceased* when it was written in the 1880s and this word did not appear in the original, which casts doubt on the June date of death. However, an 1854 *American Israelite* article by Samuel Bruel also places Lape's death in June 1821. Although Bruel wrote three decades after Lape's death, it appears he had enough first-hand information to write a true telling. Bruel arrived in Cincinnati with his wife and children sometime during the 1830s, from Portsmouth, England—following many of their family, friends, and neighbors who had been emigrating over the previous two decades. Members of the Johnson, Jonas, Moses, and Symonds families, all from Portsmouth, appear to have intermarried while still in England. Furthermore, Bruel's brother-in-law Philip Symonds arrived in Cincinnati in 1819 and witnessed the events of Lape's death. There are also direct family ties between Bruel and Morris Moses, to whom Lape deeded the original property. Bruel states, "In June 1821 Benjamin Lape died on which occasions...the founders of the first congregation in this city, purchased from N. Longworth twenty-five by fifty feet of ground on the corner of Chestnut Street and Western Row and interred the remains of Benjamin Lape, the first Jew who died in the city."¹¹ This phrasing further confirms that Lape was known as a Jew before his death. However, the Chestnut Street property deed was not articulated until November 6, 1821. An 1887 *Cincinnati Enquirer* article indicated that "the ground was used for burial purposes before it formally passed into the control of the Hebrews."¹² Thus, it appears that the June death date is accurate and Lape was interred in the Chestnut Street Cemetery over five months before it was formally established.

With Lape's burial in June and the official organization in November, Chestnut Street Cemetery became the first Jewish institution west of the Allegheny Mountains. June 1821 was an important month for the community to celebrate

birth as well as death. On June 2, 1821, Frederick A. Johnson (1821–1893), son of David and Eliza Johnson, became the first Jewish child born in Cincinnati. The community quickly grew through immigration, marriages, and births and worked to establish other needed institutions. In 1824, Morris Moses, Joseph Jonas, David Johnson, Jonas Levy, Solomon Moses, Simeon Moses, Phineas Moses, Samuel Jonas, Solomon Buckingham, and Morris Symonds formalized their congregation. They named it Kal a Kodish Beneh Israel and followed the Polish and German Jewish ways of worship in rented rooms.¹³ The founders immediately began expressing their progressivism by introducing a women’s chorus: “Being all young people they were not so prejudiced in favour of old customs as more elderly people might have been.... We therefore introduced considerable chorus singing into our worship, in which we were joined by the sweet voices of the fair daughters of Zion.”¹⁴ Laymen, primarily David Johnson, Morris Moses, and Joseph Jonas, took turns acting as the hazan (official who sings or chants liturgical music and leads the congregation in prayer). In 1826, a committee was gathered to begin seeking funds for construction of a permanent synagogue. In the same year, on October 25, Morris Moses and David Johnson purchased an adjacent twenty-five-by-fifty-foot parcel of land on Chestnut Street for expansion of the cemetery from Nicholas Longworth for \$1.¹⁵

In a letter to the Jewish Congregation of Charleston in 1825, Jonas wrote, “We have at this time a room fitted up for a Synagog, the manuscripts of the law, and a burying ground in which we have already interred four persons.”¹⁶ This record of interments, combined with population statistics showing about twenty-five Jewish persons in Cincinnati in 1824, suggests the lofty ambitions of the city’s Jewish pioneers.¹⁷ Using standardized modern burial plot sizes as measurement, the community had ample room to bury at least 60 individuals in the original cemetery, with this expansion doubling the number of available plots to 120. The letter to Charleston also mentions “six unassessed members of the congregation, one of whom was brought to be interred from Louisville.” Not only did the pioneers expect their community to grow quickly and dramatically, but they also considered their congregation a home for those Jews in the “surrounding wilderness.” Jonas claimed, perhaps with some exaggeration, theirs was the only congregation within five hundred miles and believed that, given the ease of access to Cincinnati via the river, congregants from as far away as New Orleans would frequently visit the synagogue. Jonas believed Cincinnati would become the great unifier and a sanctuary for the Jewish persons “scattered through the wilds of America” and “lost in the country, from not being in the neighborhood of a congregation.”¹⁸

This idea of Cincinnati as the new Promised Land for the Jews was not entirely unfounded. Jonas describes genial relations with the gentile community of the city and beyond, when “many persons of the Nazarene faith residing from 50 to 100 miles from the city...came into town for the special purpose of viewing

and conversing with some of ‘the children of Israel.’” More than fifty Christians donated to the synagogue building campaign, and during the dedication of the new building, on September 9, 1836, “the crowd of our Christian friends was so great that we could not admit them all.”¹⁹ This was in great contrast to how Jews were treated in Europe during this time. Western European laws made life much harder for Jewish people, limiting trades, land ownership, marriages, and even travel. Life in some American cities was not much better. In New York, Jewish public worship, employment in public services, and ownership of retail businesses were banned. Such laws continued through at least 1868 in North Carolina, Vermont, and New Hampshire.²⁰

One large advantage in America was that traditional Jewish trades, limited to lower classes in Europe, were the basis of working toward the “American dream” among all settler communities. The most typical occupation for Jewish immigrants was peddling. Peddlers were an integral part of the American frontier, providing much-needed goods to isolated farmsteads throughout the region. Many Jews became quite successful, moving quickly from foot travel to horse and cart, then even establishing their own stores. The next step was selling merchandise wholesale.²¹ The 1830 Cincinnati city directory lists three merchants, one jeweler, three clothiers, three dry goods merchants, one baker, three clerks, and one carpenter of Jewish faith.²² The manufacture of clothing quickly became the dominant enterprise among Cincinnati Jewry, contributing greatly to the city being labeled “the ready-made clothing capital of the West” by 1850.²³ At this time, one-fourth of the city’s 2,500-3,500 Jewish residents were associated with the clothing trades.²⁴

No doubt stories of these economic and religious opportunities spread far and wide throughout the Jewish diaspora of the 1820s. As discussed, many of the founding families of the Cincinnati Jewish community came from Portsmouth, England, and they knew each other prior to emigrating. These friends and families continued to extend their stories of plenty to other friends and family, leading to remarkable growth in the Jewish population between 1824 and 1830. By 1840, the population again grew tenfold, with approximately 1,500 Jewish residents, making up about 3 percent of Cincinnati’s total populace.²⁵ The expanded burial ground on Chestnut Street only had room for about 125 interments, causing the congregation leaders to purchase an adjoining parcel from Longworth on September 11, 1838, for \$500 (\$14,181.34 today). While the exact dimensions of this additional land are unknown, this purchase likely came close to doubling the size of the burial ground.²⁶

This final expansion of the burial ground was never used for burial purposes. Instead, Kal a Kodish Beneh Israel opened a new cemetery in 1850. Chestnut Street Cemetery was founded outside the city boundaries, in a rural area next to a large farm. The city of Cincinnati did not annex this land until 1840.²⁷ By 1850, it had fully engulfed the cemetery, with residences and businesses surrounding it on all sides. As miasma theory spread, it became a common belief that decaying

organic matter, such as that found in cemeteries, produced noxious air responsible for epidemic illnesses like tuberculosis, malaria, and cholera.²⁸ As the 1849 cholera epidemic killed 4 percent of Cincinnati's population, the city's cemeteries also became quite overcrowded, furthering the belief that they were noxious and unhealthy places. The city of Cincinnati banned further burials in the city basin, proposing instead that all new cemeteries be founded outside of the city limits. This official ordinance was passed on July 1, 1853, but the last known burial in Chestnut Street Cemetery occurred in 1849. While the official reason for the cemetery closure is unknown, theories abound.

It is possible that the Jewish community took the threat of miasma very seriously, and chose to close its cemetery earlier than others did. The original Jewish community lay to the south of the cemetery, but as more Jews of German descent moved to the city, they settled with other German speakers in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, just east of the cemetery.²⁹ It is possible that in trying to protect itself, the Jewish community sought out a rural cemetery. It is also possible that the general city population used miasma as a form of antisemitism to single out this "other" community as the cause of its disease. The community could have simply been seeking closure after the difficult pandemic, although it was not quite over yet. Of course, the closure of Chestnut Street Cemetery during the cholera epidemic may have just been coincidental. It seems much more likely that the closure was cultural.

Ideas about cemetery design and purpose changed dramatically during the nineteenth century: "Rapid urban growth and population mobility, booming business and commercial ventures, aggregations of surplus wealth, concentration of educated and public-spirited people, revisions of religious doctrines, romantic affection for nature—all combined to create a context in which the rural cemetery was a logical alternative to the burial places of an earlier era."³⁰ That new form of cemetery, commonly traced to Père Lachaise in Paris, is referred to as the memorial garden type and contained winding, tree-lined paths with grand monuments and ornamental plantings. These cemeteries are quite different from those like Chestnut Street Cemetery, with its simple rows of single upright stones bearing little more than name and date of death. The movement had definitively made it to Cincinnati by 1844, when famed landscape architect Adolph Strauch (1822–1883) designed Spring Grove Cemetery. The new cemetery, which opened in September 1845, replaced at least twenty-three of the city's overcrowded church-owned cemeteries. Today it sprawls through hundreds of acres on Cincinnati's West Side. While the exact number of Jewish burials at Spring Grove is unknown, it is clear that the cemetery became a popular burial place within the Jewish community. This draw, combined with the fact that Strauch also designed Kal a Kodish Beneh Israel's new cemetery in the memorial garden plan makes it entirely likely that the congregation planned its new



The 1850 opening of a suburban cemetery in Walnut Hills marked the end of internments at Chestnut Street. Courtesy of Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati.

cemetery in direct reaction to Spring Grove. Whatever the reason, the congregation purchased a 10.5-acre tract of land about 2.5 miles east of the city, in Walnut Hills. The city of Evanston was founded in this area in 1893, with the Walnut Hills Cemetery squarely in the center. Today, both communities are neighborhoods within the city of Cincinnati. The first interment, which took place on February 18, 1850, marked the closing of Chestnut Street Cemetery.³¹

The small burial ground sat largely undisturbed for two decades. The congregation took care of the cemetery, and the city continued to grow up around it. Then in the 1870s, everything changed. The city, with a population of over two hundred thousand, was growing crowded. Still two decades away from easy access to the hilltops, property owners strained the basin to use every square foot of land. Kal a Kodish Beneh Israel received an opportunity too economically fortunate to pass up. A “prominent capitalist” approached the congregation to buy the Chestnut Street Cemetery lot, intending to build a commercial block on the site. Members voted unanimously to sell the land, disinter the bodies, and reinter them at the now well-established Walnut Hills Cemetery. Fortunately, the son of David Johnson put a stop to these plans. Attorney Edward Johnson (d. 1922) adamantly opposed disturbing the graves of his parents and appealed to the courts. He was granted a permanent injunction against the sale of the lot. The congregation members did not give up hope, and they spent the following years holding meetings to plan the dissolution of this decree. When Johnson heard word, he promised a “desperate legal fight” and argued that the financial benefit to the temple was not “sufficient to warrant the sacrilege of unearthing the dead.”³² In October 1870, the disappointed congregants convened a committee to purchase the final ten-foot-by-fifty-foot tract of land along Central Avenue from Longworth’s descendants. They leased the land in

January 1871 and finally completed the purchase in 1873. Three buildings, variously described as stores and houses, were constructed on the unused portion of the cemetery, and the congregation leased these properties for many years to come. This compromise resulted in economic growth for the congregation while it maintained the sacred site, albeit with a smaller footprint.



After the cemetery's closure, a high brick wall and iron gate kept the site well hidden from most Cincinnatians. Courtesy of Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati.

A high brick wall, part of which remains today, was constructed to surround the cemetery, obscuring it from sight except through an iron gate along Chestnut Street. The gate was locked, the key given to a nearby merchant, and the cemetery was largely forgotten about for many years. An 1887 *Cincinnati Enquirer* article described the hullabaloo of finding the gate key when the author enquired: "The key was so seldom called for he had forgotten where it was." The author wrote of the difficult task of coercing the key into the rusty lock and opening the gate: "The stanch iron gate cracked a remonstrance against the intrusion as it suddenly swung backward upon its corroded hinges." The monuments were also in bad condition: "lime-stained and weather beaten tombstones, inclining heavenwards at various angles of weariness, while not a few had grown utterly disgusted at their long neglect and laid themselves flat upon the earth.... Some of the stones were broken and all so disfigured by time and the elements their inscriptions were almost illegible." The reporter described the deplorable condition of the grounds, "The sodden ground is profusely covered with broken fruit cans, empty beer bottles, ashes, garbage and other contaminants of a first-class goat pasture."³³ By this point, many of the descendants of the early Jewish founders buried within had moved out of their West End enclave to hilltop neighborhoods, abandoning the West End to the



Out of sight, the cemetery fell into disrepair.
 Courtesy of Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati.

new wave of Polish and Russian Jewish immigrants that filled the neighborhood. It is not surprising that, without regular visitation, the cemetery was forgotten, left to decay behind a large wall and wedged between other buildings.

The cemetery remained in much the same state until Rabbi David Philipson took an interest in it around the turn of the century. In 1894, he wrote, “The stones are in a fair state of preservation, although the inscriptions on some of them are well-nigh illegible.”³⁴ He counted eighty-five stones and estimated around a hundred burials. This is the same estimate used today, so any lost stones likely preceded Philipson’s visit. It is entirely possible that the remaining fifteen burials, including that of Benjamin Lape, never had markers to begin with or that their markers were constructed of more fragile or homemade materials that had been lost to time. Several newspaper articles refer to the Lape’s missing tombstone, the first reference dating to the 1850s, when the cemetery had only recently closed. If his marker were constructed of wood, the thirty years since his death year would be the full extent of the life of the material, and it could have easily disintegrated.

Most of the tombstone inscriptions are quite basic, recounting the names of the deceased, possibly a relationship, and the date of death. Several include the age and even European homeland, lending light to early immigration patterns. A few contain personalized epitaphs, as does that of the young wife of Joseph Jonas: “The tomb for the grave of Rachel, daughter of Rev. Gershom M. Seixas, and wife of Joseph Jonas. With an amiable and virtuous reputation she departed this life at 26, and was interred the 22d Shebat, 5587 [February 19, 1827]. On the same day her son was circumcised and named Gershom. He also died and was interred on the right side of his mother on the 28th Tammuz, 5587 [July 23, 1827]. And their souls shall be wrapped in the fullness of eternal life.”³⁵

Most stones contain a mixture of Hebrew and English, showing the quick adoption of Americanized values by this new community. The stone of Rachael Lewis (1794–1831) is entirely in English. The lack of Hebrew lettering, very atypical for the time, represents just how malleable this early community was to assimilation. However, it is perhaps the row of graves closest to the gate whose inscriptions derive the most meaning. Those graves, all grouped together, tell a very sad story in a few short words: “Died of Cholera.”³⁶ The number of graves featuring similar epitaphs is so large that an 1887 visitor to the cemetery speculated, “The epidemic of Cholera...added to the growing population of the little cemetery with a rapidity so startling as almost to lead to the belief that the rate of mortality was greater among the Hebrews than any other class of Cincinnati citizens.”³⁷

Philipson’s passion for the cemetery continued throughout his career. He referred to it in many of his writings, which have long been considered the authority on the foundational period of Jewish settlement in Cincinnati. In 1931, Philipson took this passion to another level, installing a tablet to mark the cemetery. A member of Kal a Kodish Beneh Israel, by this point commonly known as Rockdale Temple, donated the plaque, which reads: “Oldest Jewish Cemetery west of the Allegheny Mountains. Opened 1821, closed 1849 by K.K. Bene Israel.” Rabbi Philipson gave a speech for the occasion: “We owe great thanks to the pioneers who made possible by their courage and enterprise that which exists today. This tablet shall remain a memento to their greatness... The placing of this tablet is a mark of piety. We of the present are leaving for future ages memories of the past.”³⁸ The plaque, cleaned and remounted in summer of 2021, is in place today. Until very recently, it served as the only marker announcing the cemetery’s existence. However, becoming covered with vines and other growth over time, it for many years it left the cemetery entirely unmarked for those who did not know to search for the plaque. The cemetery’s popularity waned again, and there were no references to the cemetery in popular media until 2014. An article written for “Our History” in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* that year tells the story: “Many of the stones are etched with Hebraic lettering, a clue that it is a Jewish cemetery. Peeling back the tangle of vines reveals a sign: ‘The oldest Jewish Cemetery west of the Allegheny Mountains.’ The name Chestnut Street Cemetery, or even Old Jewish Cemetery, is nowhere to be found.”³⁹

Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati (JCGC) was created by a 2008 merger of United Jewish Cemeteries and individually owned cemeteries in the region. With the merger came a report of an estimated \$30,000 of necessary work needed at the site. This, combined with all of the twenty-two original JCGC-controlled Jewish cemeteries at that time, meant an approximate \$4 million in deferred maintenance needed to be addressed.⁴⁰ JCGC was created largely to deal with these funding issues, bringing “in the whole community to see if there was some way the problems could be addressed on a community-wide basis.”⁴¹ The Jewish Foundation of

Cincinnati's grant of \$4 million over the first eight years of JCGC's existence helped substantially to address these issues, but Chestnut Street Cemetery remained on the backburner, as it is the only inactive cemetery under JCGC's control.⁴² Not until planning began for the Jewish Cincinnati Bicentennial were there real efforts to repair, restore, and contextualize the cemetery.

The Jewish community celebrates two hundred years of Jewish communal life in Cincinnati via the establishment of Chestnut Street Cemetery. Although Jonas, the first permanent Jewish resident of the city arrived in 1817, he was alone in the wilderness for years. Only with the arrival of Solomon Moses in 1821 was the requisite number of worshiping community members achieved. In his writing, Jonas marked Moses's arrival as the start of the community. The month in which Moses arrived is unclear, but his arrival may have also spurred the formal purchase and dedication of Chestnut Street Cemetery in November 1821, as the formal establishment of the minyan would have prompted the commandment to establish a cemetery. Thus, the modern community marks its own founding with the cemetery's establishment. The bicentennial events began with a rededication of the cemetery on September 26, 2021, including the announcement of a new plaza in front of the cemetery, interpretive signage, and an Ohio Historical Marker. The festivities included prominent speakers from the Jewish community at large, JCGC, descendants of those interred, members of Cincinnati City Council, state representatives, representatives of the West End community, and the Betts Longworth Historic District. Approximately 275 people attended to celebrate the birth of their community and pay respects to those interred. This event was the first of more than fifty events commemorating the bicentennial, which continues nearly through the end of 2022.⁴³



The approaching bicentennial sparked a flurry of activity to restore the cemetery, including the cleaning of headstones in the summer of 2021. Courtesy of Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati.

While much work remains to be done, restoration projects began in the summer of 2021, with the repair of the crumbling brick wall along Chestnut Street. This wall, deteriorating for more than a hundred years, was covered in vines so thick that the wall was barely visible. This growth likely held together fragile portions of the brick construction: upon its removal, the bricks were in various stages of spalling, with very little intact mortar. The wall was rebuilt and whitewashed. The portion of the wall on the north side of the cemetery, adjoining the adjacent buildings, was determined too far gone to save and replaced with a new iron fence. As of this writing, the rear, west, wall continues to be vine-covered and deteriorating. JCGC hopes this wall can be repaired, but the details of its restoration or eventual replacement have yet to be determined. Other major changes include the replacement of a chain-link fence, which was installed upon the demolition of the front buildings, with an iron fence. While the fence is obviously modern construction, it gives a nod to the wrought iron gate, still in place and recently restored. Most recently completed is a reactivation of the vacant lot in front of the cemetery.

The 1982 demolition of the three buildings that shielded the cemetery from Central Avenue left a grassy lot, allowing the cemetery to be seen from the street, but not engaging drivers to stop and look. Many Cincinnatians have driven past the cemetery and failed to notice it. JCGC hopes the new plaza will change that, inviting people in and providing the neighborhood a place of respite and beauty. The plaza features a low iron fence, emulating that of the cemetery, with a gate on Chestnut Street. The brick patio features a large Star of David at the center and is surrounded by landscaping. Benches allow visitors to sit and ponder the site's history. Interpretive signage along the northern curve tells the stories of the cemetery and those interred within. An Ohio Historical Marker on Central Avenue shows the significance of the location and of the early Jewish settlers. Future signage will place the cemetery into the larger context of the West End neighborhood, the original home of the Jewish settlers and the later predominately African American community that has been greatly affected by Urban Renewal, the Interstate Highway Act, and redlining.⁴⁴

In the future, JCGC hopes to embark on an even larger preservation effort to restore and interpret the cemetery. Staff, in partnership with Rockdale Temple, will also install a cenotaph for Joseph Jonas, paying homage to his burial monument in Mobile, Alabama—where he died at his daughter's home—and to Jonas as the founder of this community. Work has already begun to clean the stones, making their inscriptions more legible. In the long term, JCGC plans to preserve all of the stones in the cemetery, protect them for future generations, explain and interpret graves that are unmarked and stones that are in Hebrew, and continue to celebrate the sacred space.

It is time to mark a new era in the oldest Jewish institution west of the Allegheny Mountains, to celebrate it for its significance and tell its story throughout the entirety of the “Great West.” Today, Chestnut Street Cemetery offers a unique glance at the intersection of Jewish diaspora and American frontier life. Those interred crossed the Atlantic Ocean and made the arduous journey across the frontier to a new city. We have learned that this pioneer community was perhaps larger and better organized than was originally thought. The early settlers established cemeteries, synagogues, social service agencies, and raised families that became the Jewish community of today. The story of the evolution of Chestnut Street Cemetery and founding of Walnut Hills Cemetery offers a glimpse at the undulations of founding and raising an American Jewish community from a single Orthodox congregation to the birthplace of American Reform Judaism. This community founded institutions in Cincinnati and across the country, contributing greatly to the fields of medicine, arts, humanities, philanthropy, social services, and industry. Several descendants have had illustrious political careers, from mayor of Cincinnati to state and national legislators. Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati will preserve this extremely significant site, as well as the twenty-five other Jewish cemeteries, for generations to come and share their histories with others.

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| <p>1 Katherine Nero, “City’s Jewish Community Starts with Cemetery,” <i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i>, Sept. 26, 2021.</p> <p>2 Barnett R. Brickner, “The Cincinnati Jewish Community: An Historical and Descriptive Study” (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 1935).</p> <p>3 Jonathan D. Sarna, “Jewish Community Called ‘a Sort of Paradise for the Hebrews,’” <i>American Israelite</i> (Cincinnati), July 7, 1988.</p> <p>4 Joseph Jonas, “The Jews in Ohio,” <i>Occident and American Jewish Advocate</i>, Dec. 25, 1843.</p> <p>5 Jonas, “Jews in Ohio.”</p> <p>6 Jonas, “Jews in Ohio.”</p> <p>7 A 2014 article tells the story as Lape having told Morris and Jonas he had been born Benjamin Leib, but primary sources of this information have not been found. See Jeff Suess, “Cemeteries Mark City’s Jewish History,” <i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i>, Oct. 5, 2014.</p> | <p>8 Equivalent to \$1,593.09 in today’s money. The story told in this paragraph is repeated in slight variations across several sources.</p> <p>9 Last will and testament of Benjamin Lape, 1821, box 4, Records of the Hamilton County, Ohio Probate Court, University of Cincinnati Archives & Rare Books Library.</p> <p>10 Rabbi David Philipson, <i>The Oldest Jewish Congregation in the West (B’ne Israel, Cincinnati)</i> (Cincinnati: C. J. Krehbiel Company, 1894).</p> <p>11 Samuel Buel, “The Israelitish Institutions of Cincinnati,” <i>American Israelite</i> (Cincinnati), July 28, 1854.</p> <p>12 “Consecrated Ground,” <i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i>, Feb. 27, 1887.</p> <p>13 This spelling is Jonas’s, in the original registration with the state. Today, the temple uses “Kahal Kodesh Bene Israel,” which translates to “Holy Congregation of the Children of Israel.”</p> <p>14 Jonas, “Jews in Ohio.”</p> |
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A NEW RESTING PLACE FOR THE SCATTERED SONS OF ISRAEL

- 15 This is often referred to as a donation, as the land was worth much more than \$1.
- 16 Joseph Jonas to the Elders of the Jewish Congregation of Charleston, July 3, 1825, Congregation Bene Israel (Cincinnati, OH) Records, American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati.
- 17 Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585–1984* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990).
- 18 Jonas to the Elders of the Jewish Congregation of Charleston.
- 19 Jonas, “Jews in Ohio.”
- 20 Brickner, “Cincinnati Jewish Community.”
- 21 For further information on Jewish peddling, see Hasia R. Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
- 22 *Williams’ Cincinnati Directory for 1830*, (Cincinnati: Williams Directory Company, 1830).
- 23 Sarna, “Jewish Community Called ‘a Sort of Paradise for the Hebrews.’”
- 24 Ann Deborah Michael. “The Origins of the Jewish Community of Cincinnati, 1817–1860,” (M.A. thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1970).
- 25 Marcus, *To Count a People*.
- 26 This was obviously still not enough space to bury fifteen hundred people, and evidence points to the founding of other Jewish cemeteries as early as 1828. Further research into the details of these forgotten cemeteries is needed.
- 27 “Betts-Longworth (Houses and Commercial Buildings) Bounded by Ezzard Charles Drive on the North, Central Avenue on the East, Old Court Street on the South, and Mound Street on the West, Cincinnati, Hamilton County, Ohio,” Historic American Building Survey, Mid-Atlantic Region National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 1982.
- 28 Carl S. Sterner, “A Brief History of Miasmatic Theory,” 2007, available at http://cssterner.nfshost.com/research/files/History_of_Miasmatic_Theory_2007.pdf
- 29 Brickner’s “Cincinnati Jewish Community” refers to the community as bounded by Harrison Street on the west, Main Street on the east, Third Street on the south, and Fifth Street on the north.
- 30 James J. Ferrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 101.
- 31 Samuel Bruel, “The Israelitish Institutions of Cincinnati,” *American Israelite* (Cincinnati), July 28, 1854.
- 32 “Consecrated Ground.” Note the change from the term *synagogue* to *temple*. This reflects the widespread adoption of Reform Judaism, as defined by Isaac M. Wise of B’nai Jeshurun and Max Lilienthal of Kal a Kodish Beneh Israel.
- 33 “Consecrated Ground.”
- 34 Philipson, *Oldest Jewish Congregation in the West*.
- 35 Philipson, *Oldest Jewish Congregation in the West*.
- 36 Chestnut Street Cemetery, Cincinnati, Ohio; the transcriptions of some headstone inscriptions may have been reviewed at the Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati Office.
- 37 “Consecrated Ground.”
- 38 “Tablet Marks Early Jewish Cemetery,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Apr. 30, 1931.
- 39 Suess, “Cemeteries Mark City’s Jewish History.”
- 40 *Cemetery Inventory For Cincinnati Jewish Community Cemetery Project Committee* (Buffalo, NY: Peter J. Smith, 2003).
- 41 Suess, “Cemeteries Mark City’s Jewish History.”
- 42 The Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati was created in 1995 through the sale of the first Jewish hospital in the United States. With a mission of investing in high-impact, transformative initiatives, this private foundation invests approximately \$18 million annually in the Cincinnati Jewish community to strengthen identity, education, and engagement while ensuring the basic needs of venerable community members are met.
- 43 More information on the bicentennial can be found at the Jewish Cincinnati Bicentennial website: <https://www.jewishcincy200.org/>.
- 44 On the West End as a Jewish neighborhood, see *Williams’ Cincinnati Directory for 1830*.