

an inquiry to the same authority, and prevailed upon him to annul the synagogue ordinance on the ground that a schism had taken place at Beth Israel over this question, and that it was a matter of "conscience" to choose meats slaughtered by one man or the other. The board was now placed in an extremely uncomfortable position. They admitted that a Jew had the right to purchase meat from the shehita of any man he saw fit; they contended, however, that no man had a right to seal the meat in the manner used by Beth Israel unless he was permitted to do so by the congregation. They denied that an actual schism had occurred, but they admitted that differences of opinion existed. Attempts at reconciliation failed and barely more than a minyan organized themselves into a new congregation which they named Tifereth Israel (Glory of Israel). Thus, the second major breakdown in Jewish community life had come to pass.

The Jews of 1909 were unwittingly sowing the seeds of disunion and of the breakdown of synagogal control. For quite a while after Tifereth Israel seceded from Beth Israel, the old arrangements were still in force. The shohetim were still employed and controlled by their respective synagogues. With multiple shohetim, however, the Jewish community lost control over the vital religious practice of shehita. The situation continued to worsen throughout the 1960s and 1970s. By the early 1980s it was difficult to acquire kosher meat in the Bangor area. Bangor Jews who sought kosher meat had to purchase it in Portland or Boston, or they could place orders with Richard Zobot, owner of the Bagel Shop in Bangor.

It was clearly a quarrel precipitated by the refusal of a defeated minority to submit to the will of the majority. The immediate effect of these two secessions in the first decade of the 1900s is difficult to ascertain. The breach, however, was healed in 1933 when a handful of the recalcitrant members and their offspring rejoined Beth Israel. Until the rift of 1900 occurred there was a more or less united Jewish community in Bangor. One synagogue and one set of officials meant one mode of accepted behavior. The secession of Tifereth Israel, however, and a revolt of Toldoth Yitzchak from Beth Abraham in 1920, nearly brought about a state of anarchy in the Jewish community. Men

performed marriage ceremonies, handed down decisions on ritual law and set themselves up as supreme authorities without the sanction of the existing synagogues. The resulting disruption of the community was in essence, an outgrowth of carrying to an extreme American freedom of religion, thought and action.

The disintegration of the community was hastened by the decay of its most potent disciplinary agent. In the old Jewish communities in Europe, the Jews had a tremendously powerful weapon against dissenters which, when applied, brought erring sheep swiftly back into the fold. This was the herem, or excommunication. Its preliminary stages involved admonition and the loss of the privilege of attending services; its final stages entailed complete social ostracism and the forfeit of burial rights. No Jew, living as he did within the confines of the ghetto and having social and cultural relations only with Jews, could afford to ignore this communal ban.

In America, excommunication could not be applied. Each synagogue wished to guide its own affairs without dictation from above. Each religious group jealously guarded its rights and privileges in true American fashion.

At times the synagogues of Bangor worked together harmoniously; at other times they clashed with one another. Beth Israel and Tifereth Israel were unfriendly toward each other after the 1909 rift; with the years, the immediate resentment over the secession faded and for some time the two congregations were able to collaborate. Their amity was again disturbed by a controversy over cemetery boundaries in the early 1920s; a second estrangement followed.

The casual visitor to Bangor would have thought that the community was united and that harmony was its watchword. Only on the surface, however, were matters so pleasant and unruffled. In matters of real importance each synagogue was a law unto itself, and each guarded its rights from encroachments of any other group. Attempts to persuade the synagogues to collaborate on communal projects almost invariably failed. This was so because each synagogue considered itself a completely independent entity, whose interests came before those of any other synagogue or of other Jews in the community at large.

## Bangor Fire Destroys Synagogue

For many years the congregation was composed almost wholly of shopkeepers, pant and sweater manufacturers, and dealers in used wares of all kinds. At first the proportion of peddlers was high. But very soon, itinerant trade led to more lucrative and respectable highways of commerce. The building of the synagogue in 1897 already gave evidence of more extensive mercantile pursuits. Largely retailers of apparel, shoes, dry goods, jewelry, there were also some tailors, grocers, and wholesalers among them. By the late 1890s many had become solidly rooted in the Yankee business community.

Max Cohen was the first to enter politics and prior to World War I was elected to the Board of Aldermen.

Congregation Beth Israel now found the wooden structure on Center Street unworthy of the aspirations of its members.

As in every religious community which had increased in size and in which more and more members had attained higher social and economic positions, a house of worship befitting the size and the status of its congregation became a matter of both pride and necessity. The little synagogue on Center Street had been big enough for the original founders. The Jews of Beth Israel now wanted an edifice which would match the respect in which they were held by their fellow citizens. The concentration of the Jewish population in the first ward also demanded a change of locale.

In 1909, Max Cohen was called back to the presidency for a second time, and his leadership and enthusiasm inspired the congregation to commit itself officially to a new synagogue building. A committee was appointed to secure an appropriate site for the new shul. Kol Nidre marked the beginning of an effort to cope with the requirements of a rapidly growing Jewish community. In his Yom Kippur appeal Cohen proclaimed, "We can feel confident that this effort will be pursued with vigor and enthusiasm till our hopes are realized and our needs met in the creation of a dignified spacious synagogue that will be a credit to the entire community."

To ensure the success of the campaign for funds for the new synagogue, letters were addressed to other congregations as well as to a few individual Jews of world-famed wealth. Even before all these generous gifts were received, the building committee had been instructed to sell the original building and commence building a new one in the "Jewish Settlement." The cost

of such an undertaking "should not be more than \$25,000."

In the early spring of 1911, the Building Committee reported, "The results achieved thus far have been most encouraging and we all feel confident that a new edifice shall be built this summer."

The deteriorating synagogue continued to need repairs. The board of directors appointed Hyman Epstein, Jonah Wallace and Arthur Allen to determine how much it would cost to put the building in condition. Before the committee could complete its study and make its recommendations to the board, the synagogue was destroyed in the great Bangor Fire of April 30, 1911.

### Story Of The Catastrophe

Shortly after 4 p.m. Sunday, April 30, fire broke out in the hay shed of J. Frank Green on lower Broad Street. Cinders were carried across Kenduskeag Stream, igniting the Stetson building, occupied by the New England Telephone Co. on Exchange Street at the foot of York. From there the flames spread with irresistible force, sweeping through the city, straight toward the outskirts along Harlow, Center and French streets and Broadway.

It was the most destructive fire to strike a Maine city, save for the Portland conflagration of 1866. Two people were killed and many were injured. The property loss was estimated between \$2.5 million and \$3 million, but there was only about \$1.5 million insurance on the burned buildings. The fire burned more than 55 acres and it was not brought under control until 5 a.m. Monday. About 100 business blocks, some of them the finest in the city, were burned. Some 285 dwellings were destroyed and between 50 and 75 families, made up of nearly 300 people, lost everything.

Soon after the fire started aid was hurriedly summoned from Brewer and Old Town. Mayor Mullen then telegraphed Waterville, Augusta, Lewiston and Portland and firefighters from those cities were rushed here on special Maine Central trains. They arrived during the evening, when the fire was at its height, and their services proved indispensable. The special train brought the Portland firemen to Bangor in a little more than three hours.

Norumbega Hall where Edwin Booth once played Hamlet was destroyed. Among the first structures to go

was the Central Fire Station. The Bangor Daily News carried on through the fire. In the path of the flames, its staff worked by candlelight through the night, setting type by hand and operating hand presses, so that the Monday morning edition reached the streets at the usual time, small in size but informative in content. The fire was stopped short of the News' plant.

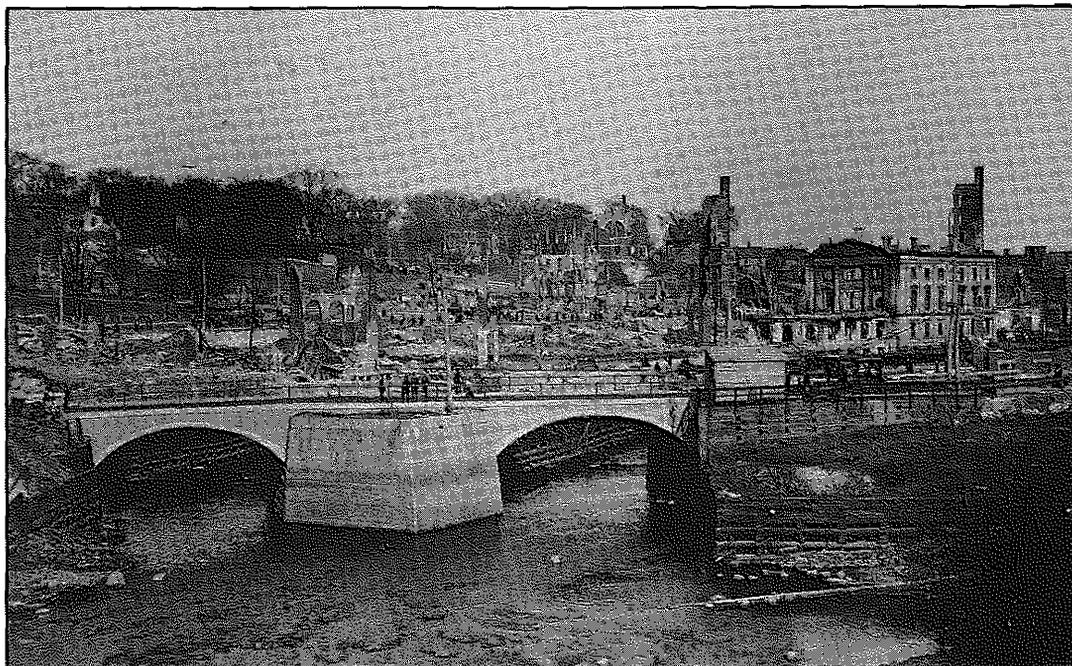
It is safe to say that few people in the city of 25,000 slept during that grim night as the National Guard patrolled the streets and weary firefighters struggled to keep the flames from spreading, using dynamite to destroy buildings in its path.

Entirely wiped out were the business blocks on Exchange Street from York Street to East Market Square, and on State Street from the Merrill Trust Co. building to Broadway; Park Street, its entire length and a large section of Central and Franklin streets.

The residential portion of the city also suffered a most terrible loss. Many of the beautiful residences on the east side of Broadway between State Street and South Park, went up in flames. Between the same limits on French Street nearly every residence was burned, while starting from Harlow Street the flames cut an almost clean swath clear to the east side of Broadway between State and South Park, burning hundreds of dwellings on Harlow, Spring, Penobscot, Prospect, Cumberland, Center, Somerset, Garland and Park streets. Partial or total losses were sustained by Beth Israel members, L. Rudman, Wolf Lipsky, Israel Frank and Lena Rosen.

In addition, several houses of worship were destroyed by the raging flames. Those destroyed included the First Parish Congregational on Broadway, the Central Congregational and St. John's Episcopal on French Street, the Universalist, First Baptist, the Christian Advent on Center Street and our own Beth Israel Synagogue on Center Street.

Tom Gibbons, a lineman, had just gone into the synagogue to dynamite it as a barricade to the advancing flames when a huge beam fell across the door, holding it shut. The building was already on fire. For two or three minutes onlookers watched helplessly. Then Gibbons hauled himself through a cellar window



A general view of Bangor after the devastating fire of 1911.

## BANGOR DAILY NEWS, MAY 24, 1911

### SCIENTIST CHURCH IS AIDING THE CHURCHES THAT PLAN TO REBUILD JEWISH CONGREGATION GETS \$22.42

Treasurer Max Cohen of the Beth Israel Congregation, which lost its synagogue in the fire, received on Tuesday from G. C. Eames, treasurer of the First Church of Christ Scientist, a check for \$22.42. That being the apportionment of the contribution made by the executive board of the latter church for the rebuilding or refinishing of those churches or organizations destroyed.

#### The Letter From G. C. Eames

Bangor, Maine  
May 22, 1911

Mr. Max Cohen, Treas.  
Bangor, Maine

Dear Sir:

By vote of our Executive Board, our contribution of Sunday, May 21st, is to be given to the building funds of the several churches and organizations, who are to rebuild or to refinish church homes.

I am, therefore, enclosing a check for one-eighth of the amount collected.

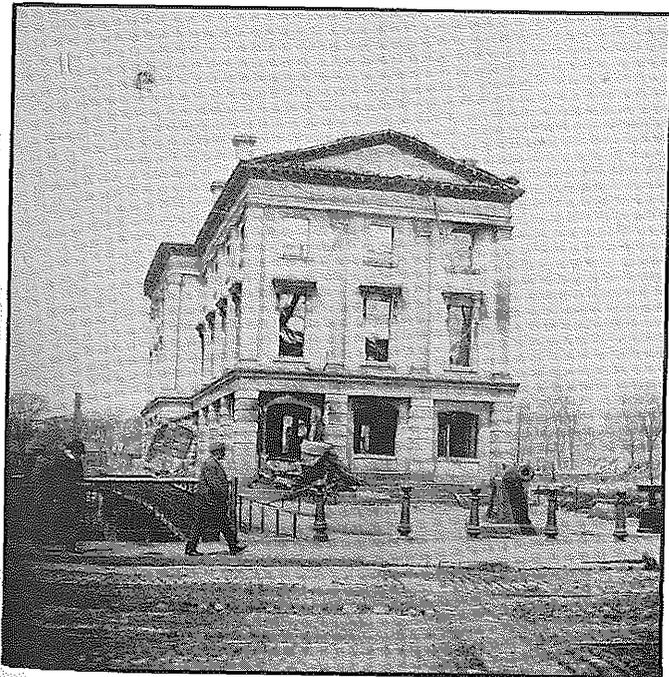
Sincerely yours,

Signed: G. C. Eames  
Treasurer, First Church of Christ  
Scientist

with half a dozen sticks of dynamite in one hand and the fuses draped over his arm. In a matter of seconds there was a muffled explosion inside and the building collapsed like a house of cards. Adolph B. Friedman had entered the synagogue to assist in the salvage of the Sefer Torahs and other holy books. These men barely escaped with their lives.



Smoke rises from the ruins at the corner of Park and State streets after the Bangor fire in 1911.



The Bangor Post Office after the 1911 fire.



The First Parish Congregational Church after the 1911 fire.