



## Tree of Life Foundation

267 Congress Street  
Portland, Maine 04101  
(207) 329-9854

[www.treeoflifemuseum.org](http://www.treeoflifemuseum.org)



# Maine Museum of Jewish Art and History



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## **Tree of Life Foundation**

The Tree of Life Foundation has initiated a bold plan to restore a venerable monument of Jewish life and transform it into the Maine Museum of Jewish Art and History.

The foundation, a 501C(3) non-profit corporation formed in 2008, will fulfill a three-part mission.



**Tree of Life Foundation**



# Our Mission / Phase 1

■ Our first job will be to rescue the Etz Chaim Synagogue building by restoring its past simple elegance. The balcony section needs major renovation in order to be saved. Necessary work includes restoration of stained glass windows, repairing chandeliers and restoring the high, curved dome ceiling. The main floor of the sanctuary and the chapel also need extensive work to reverse damage from years of neglect.



## Our Mission / Phase 2

■ The restored building will function as a museum of Maine Jewish history, art and culture, reflecting the contributions and accomplishments made by Maine's original Jewish immigrants and their families. The museum will also showcase current art and changing exhibits by Maine's Jewish artists, including photography and historical presentations among other displays.



## Our Mission / Phase 3

■ The museum will provide educational outreach and opportunities for the community's newest immigrants. They struggle with the same obstacles once faced by the founders of this synagogue, whose ideal was "to be a light unto the nations."

*"Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery."*

— **Horace Mann** (1796-1859) *Educator & Statesman*

## An Architect's View

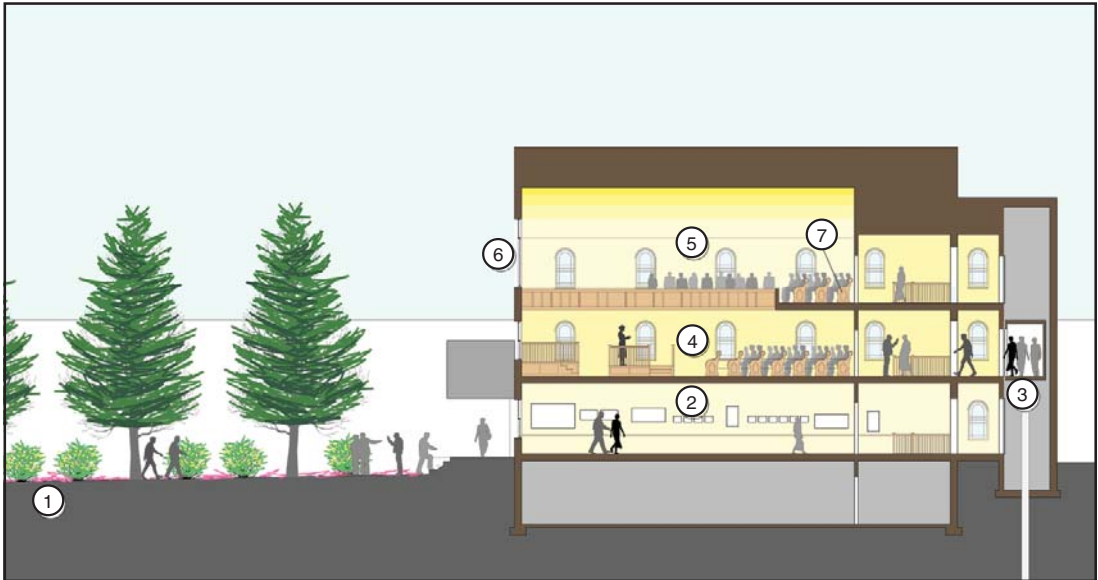
■ The Tree of Life Foundation has commissioned noted architect Winton Scott to develop plans for the renovation and new construction that will accommodate the museum. Included here are two preliminary drawings supplied by Mr. Scott. One view illustrates the front of the building with a small new addition on the left. The other pictures a cutaway of the building's three floors, including a new elevator and other modifications to meet current building requirements.



**ETZ CHAIM SYNAGOGUE AND MAINE MUSEUM OF JEWISH ART & HISTORY  
ADDITIONS RENOVATIONS AND RESTORATION  
THE TREE OF LIFE FOUNDATION  
265 CONGRESS STREET, PORTLAND, MAINE**

Winton Scott Architects

July 15, 2008



- ① Entry Courtyard – New landscaping and paving materials
- ② Entry Hall – Heritage Museum exhibits
- ③ New elevator for handicap accessibility to all floors
- ④ Fully restore second floor sanctuary space
- ⑤ Remove false ceiling and fully restore third floor sanctuary space
- ⑥ Remove brick wall and fully restore arched window in front wall
- ⑦ Restore and reinstall original wooden pews at third floor

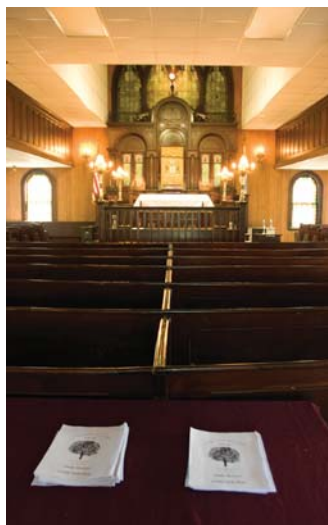
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## Jerusalem of the North

■ In the early years of the twentieth century, Jews arrived in America from central and eastern Europe to escape persecution. Maine was nicknamed “Jerusalem of the North” because there were so many Jewish people living here. In addition to Portland, there were also significant Jewish populations that made their way to Bangor, Augusta, Rockland, Bath, Biddeford, Calais, Old Orchard, Lewiston and even Presque Isle. They opened synagogues and Jewish Community Centers wherever they settled. Today there is but one remaining example in Maine of an immigrant era European-style synagogue still in operation. That is Etz Chaim Synagogue.



## The Birth of Etz Chaim

■ Etz Chaim Synagogue was created in 1921 when a group of worshippers broke away from a nearby synagogue. Founders of Etz Chaim wanted to hear sermons in English rather than the usual Yiddish and were considered radical or progressive, depending upon your view. It was a working-class synagogue, though its founders included many prominent community leaders.

*New Entrance Grounds at Synagogue from Portland Evening Express photo dated November 17, 1941 on Rosh Hashanah eve.*





Maine's first Jewish immigrants arrived in the 1840's and were mostly middle class or poor. Those peddlers, tailors and dry goods merchants believed strongly in family and in education. Many of their children went on to higher learning and became judges, lawyers, physicians, educators and merchants. They began to have influence in their communities and beyond. The Maine Museum of Jewish Art and History will tell the story of many of those men and women who played important roles in shaping Maine's future.

## Orthodox Synagogues

■ The newly arrived immigrants naturally built houses of worship that reflected the synagogues left behind. Orthodox synagogues required women to have seating separate from men. The main



sanctuary at Etz Chaim contains a balcony from which women observed and participated in services conducted by the men one floor below them.

## The Sanctuary

■ The sanctuary today remains much like it was when it was built in 1921. The beautiful hand-made Holy Ark is home to the synagogue's eight torah scrolls and sits under a large stained-glass window. Simple stained-glass windows also run the length of the room on both sides. The bal-

cony, once the highest vantage point from which mothers and daughters would observe services, has long been hidden away behind a suspended ceiling. The wonderful chandeliers that once

illuminated the sanctuary with their dancing light are still hanging proudly, awaiting a time when they will again light up their surroundings. The curved wooden pews, delivered to the synagogue by way of horse and team, still sit where they were fastened nearly ninety years ago. The sanctuary is the jewel of the synagogue and will be the main attraction of the museum.



## The Chapel

■ The chapel, a smaller and more intimate space, was most commonly used for daily and Sabbath prayers and is still used today. Acoustical tiles now cover the chapel's original ceiling. Plywood paneling that was so popular in the 1960's hides its plaster walls. The main sanctuary is reserved for use on High Holidays and for life-cycle events such as weddings and B'nai Mitzvot.

## Homage to Loved Ones

■ Families pay homage to their departed loved ones by affixing a commemorative bronze plaque on a memorial board. Each individual plaque is lit on the anniversaries of their deaths and all of the plaques are lit for the four major Jewish holidays each year. Many of the families have since moved away from Maine or have died with no successors. For them there is nobody left to observe Yahrzeits, the anniversaries of their deaths.



The larger memorial plaques represent original founders of Etz Chaim and their families. The smaller plaques were relocated to the Etz Chaim chapel when a synagogue situated two blocks west was razed to make way for urban renewal in the late 1960's. In the 1970's another synagogue located two blocks south was sold and converted to office condominiums.

## The Garden

■ The “new” front entrance was dedicated on Rosh Hashanah eve on September 17, 1941. It featured a long, straight approach across the narrow lawn to the front door. Newly planted trees lined the approach on both sides from the street to the synagogue. Nearly half of the trees were lost to a major

storm in April of 2007. The remainders of these once stately spruce trees are damaged and must be removed. This spot, with its vantage point overlooking India Street all the way to Portland Harbor to the south, will set the tone for the museum and its experience. A meditative garden will be created where people can either sit and reflect or simply enjoy the surroundings as they make their way up the walk to the building.

## Synagogue Neighborhood

■ Etz Chaim Synagogue is located in a six square-block area of the city once filled with both Jewish and Italian immigrants. It contained a Jewish grocer, baker, and five kosher butchers. Etz Chaim synagogue is the last remaining vestige of those days when Jewish immigrant life thrived in this area.

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception is home to Maine's Roman Catholic Diocese, one block to our west. St. Peter's Parish, an Italian National Church, sits one block to our south. The Abyssinian Church, third oldest African Meeting House in the U.S., lies one more block to the east. Two blocks from there you will find the Green Memorial AME Zion Church. St Paul's Church, home to Maine's Episcopal/Anglican Diocese, is the closest neighbor two doors down. These last three churches are included on the National Register.



Many of Maine's newest residents live within a few blocks of this area. Immigrants from Africa, Southeast Asia and Central America form the majority of residents in this proud and ever-changing community.

### **For more information please contact:**

Gary Berenson / Executive Director / Tree of Life Museum  
(207) 329-9854 / [gary@treeoflifemuseum.org](mailto:gary@treeoflifemuseum.org)

Jody Sataloff / President / Tree of Life Foundation  
(207) 799-6100 / [jody@treeoflifemuseum.org](mailto:jody@treeoflifemuseum.org)

