

FIRST SYNAGOGUE IN WINCHESTER

By Ellen Knight¹

Not until 2000 did the Jewish community of Winchester have a synagogue within the town.

Temple Shir Tikvah began in 1970 with a few of Winchester's Jewish families meeting for Friday night Shabbat potluck suppers. Their numbers grew until, in 1984, 33 families voted to form a temple, later named Temple Shir Tikvah—Song of Hope. Over more years, the congregation continued to grow with members coming from Winchester, Arlington, Lexington, Stoneham, Medford, and Reading. By 1998, there were 230 member families.

During its first dozen years, the group met in various locations, including Winchester's First Congregational Church and Sanborn House, as well as sites in other towns. For six years, after merging with Temple Judea in Stoneham, it had a building in Stoneham, though that building was reportedly never adequate.

In 1998, the Temple announced that it had purchased 34 Vine St. for conversion into a synagogue. Two years later their new home had been completely renovated and was opened with great celebration.

THE BUILDING

The building's history is characterized by changing use. It began as a private residence, then became the headquarters successively of the Knights of Columbus, Odd Fellows, and American Legion, before again becoming a residential building.

The original house was a doctor's home. It was, apparently, the second home of Dr. William Ingalls (1813-1903), who settled in Winchester in 1846. His first home was on Thompson Street, believed to be the current #33. Then, about 1860 according to the Winchester Historical Commission,² he lived at the corner of Main and Mt. Vernon Streets, on the site of the Brown and Stanton Building. (The 1854 Winchester map shows a building on this site owned by James R. Bayley, though whether he had any connection with this house is unknown.)

Ingalls left town during the years of the Civil War. His house then became the home of Dr. Frederick Winsor (1829-1889), who, like Ingalls, was a native of Boston, a graduate of Harvard Medical School, and an army surgeon during the war. In 1864 Winsor and his family settled in Winchester in the Ingalls house and became prominent in local affairs and in education. During the early 1870s Winsor moved the house to Vine Hill at the head of Park Street and soon sold the Main Street lot to Brown and Stanton.

Because of the Winsors, the building already held a place in the history of Winchester's religious societies. While it still stood on Main Street, the first meeting of Unitarians which led to the

formation of the Winchester Unitarian Society was held in the Winsors' parlor on Nov. 19, 1865. That group raised their own building in 1870.

By 1874, the house was moved to a street then unnamed. Standing alone on a 3/4-acre lot overlooking Wedge Pond, it was said to be at the head of Park Street. During part of the 1880s and 1890s the street was called Vernon, while the name Vine was applied to the street running alongside the Congregation Church between Vernon and Church streets. Later Vernon Street became part of Vine.

Following the Winsors and two subsequent owners, in 1920 the house was purchased by the Knights of Columbus. The council had been chartered in February 1897, and had rented rooms on Main Street near the other end of Park Street. In 1920, when membership numbered about 250, the group purchased the Vine Street house and the 24,000-foot lot. The building was a large frame house to which the Knights planned an auditorium on the second floor, as well as a reading room, reception room, and pool room on the ground floor.

In January 1921 fire seriously damaged the building. By May 1922 the council had completed repairs and remodeling and was able to reoccupy the building, but after only five years the Knights sold it to the Waterfield Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (established in 1894). The Odd Fellows, in turn, sold the building to the American Legion.



The Legion (chartered in 1919) had had a home in the Cutting House, which stood next to the library, but by 1946 that house had become inadequate for the increased membership resulting from World War II. The Cutting House was turned over to the School Department, and Post 97 moved to Vine Street.

In 1974, the building was again damaged by fire, was sold four years later, became a two-family dwelling, and was later transformed into an apartment house.

MEETING IN WOBURN

Meanwhile, without a local synagogue the Jewish families of Winchester had to go out of town to participate in community religious services. As early as 1906, Jewish families in Woburn met for religious services but did not have a permanent place. Reportedly, "they stored the Torah in Isaac Berman's house, and when it was needed for services, junk dealer Morris Weiner hitched up his horse and wagon, picked up Isaac and the Torah, and brought them to services."³

In 1910, the *Winchester Star* reported, "The Hebrews of Woburn, Winchester, and vicinity held a meeting in Woburn and formed an organization known as the Woburn Hebrew Progressive Association. The purpose of the association is benevolent in its nature, and it is expected that all Hebrews in the vicinity will become members."⁴

Charles Feinberg of Winchester was the vice-president. In 1919, it was reported that the Association was considering the erection of a synagogue in Woburn to accommodate Woburn and Winchester. Though a fund was being collected and a site was being sought, it was not until 1930 that the Woburn Hebrew Center was founded with the purchase of the office and garage of an old tannery on Green Street.⁵ In 1973, it moved to Burlington.

AT HOME IN WINCHESTER

In 1997, when the owners of 34 Vine heard that the Winchester temple was searching for a place, they approached the congregation's leaders. The purchase and sales agreement was signed the next March. William Sloan Associates was hired to design the remodeling.

"In the fall of 2000, members of all ages filled the streets of Winchester, led by a group of klezmer musicians. The three Torahs in our arms were from Temple Judea, a legacy of the congregation that had entrusted them to us seven years before. We danced in the streets with our children, dedicated our building, placed the old Torahs in their new ark, and celebrated. We were home."⁶



¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 3, 1998. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Inventory of Houses Built prior to 1917 compiled by the Winchester Historical Commission in 1979.

³ Phyllis Berlow of Burlington, a former Shalom Emeth president, quoted by Judy Wasserman, "Temple Shalom Emeth celebrates 40 years in Burlington," *Burlington Union*, Mar 23, 2014.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 11, 1910.

⁵ Carol Clingan's "Massachusetts Synagogues and Their Records, Past and Present," posted on-line, gives 1906 as the beginning of the Woburn Hebrew Center, with 1930 as the date it moved to Green Street.

⁶ Temple Shir Tikvah Web site, "Our Story."