

From The Parnas:

By Mark I. Wolfson

This summer, the Mikveh Israel Cemetery located on Spruce Street between 8th and 9th Streets, will be open for visitors every Sunday and Tuesday through Friday from 10am to 3pm through August 2nd. Our guide will be Mr. Jordan Peiper.

The Mikveh Israel Spruce Street Cemetery is the oldest cemetery in Pennsylvania, and the third oldest cemetery in the United States after New York and Rhode Island. The cemetery dates back to 1740, when Nathan Levy applied for a grant of land to John Penn, proprietor of Pennsylvania. The application was for a plot 30 feet square, for burial purposes. The plot was enlarged in 1752 with an additional grant 30 feet by 60 feet, and then again in 1765 with a grant applied for by Matthias Bush. Though intended as a burial ground for the Jews of Congregation Mikveh Israel, the plots were owned by the Levy family and the Bush family, who paid an annual tax on the land.

In 1791, the congregation formed a burial trust, whose Trustees were Manual Josephson, Joseph Simons, Bernard Gratz, Solomon Lyon and Samuel Hays. The document forming the trust was signed by David Franks, cousin and long-time partner of Nathan Levy. Another document granted Nathan's descendents "unrestrained and absolute right of burial, and all and every honor and privilege of sepulture for themselves". In 1828, the State Legislature of Pennsylvania officially granted ownership of the land to the Hebrew Congregation of Mikveh Israel. In 1953, the City of Philadelphia officially made the cemetery an historic shrine, and in 1956, a hearing was held in Washington DC concerning a proposed Federal Bill to make the famous Spruce Street Burial Ground of Congregation Mikveh Israel a part of Independence National Historical Park. This bill was passed by an act of Congress and the cemetery became a National Historical Site.

The cemetery is the final resting place of many important people in the history of Mikveh Israel, the city of Philadelphia and the United States. Nathan Levy, a very prominent and successful merchant from the Trading House of Levy and Franks, whose ship Myrtilla brought the Liberty Bell to Philadelphia, along with his cousin and partner David Franks and their families are buried there. The Gratz family, including Michael and Bernard, founding members of Mikveh Israel are buried there along with Michael's wife Miriam and their children Sarah, Simon, Jacob, Hyman and Rebecca.

Simon Gratz was a treasurer of Mikveh Israel and a founding member of The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Jacob Gratz received his Masters of Arts Degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1811. He was a member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and in 1839 was elected to the State Senate. Hyman Gratz was prominent in the Insurance industry, serving 20 years as the President of the Pennsylvania Company for Insurance on Lives and Granting Annuities. He was also a Director and Treasurer of The Academy of the Fine Arts. He was very active in the affairs of Mikveh Israel as a member of the Board of Directors and served as treasurer for 32 years. The money from his estate was directed to founding and institution which became Gratz College.

The last of Michael and Miriam's children to be buried in the cemetery was the famous Rebecca Gratz who was honored and acclaimed in her own times and even through the present day. A beautiful woman, as well as kind and also tireless, she devoted her life and keen intellect and organization skills to good works. She founded and led many organizations that benefited people in difficult circumstances, as well as those that furthered Jewish education.

Finally, perhaps the most illustrious of the members of Mikveh Israel buried in the Spruce Street Cemetery is Haym Salomon. Salomon was a financial genius and a patriot whose love of liberty and business acumen made him a vital force in the War of Independence. He gave his time, energy, tireless spirit and all of his financial resources to further the American cause of freedom.

In the words of Reverend Leon H. Elmaleh, Minister of Mikveh Israel from 1897 until his death in 1972 (also buried there),

"The great and non-great of the past, slumbering in this peaceful green oasis in the midst of our busy city streets, are not forgotten".