



RIJHA NEWSLETTER

Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association

75 years of preserving Rhode Island Jewish history

BY JAIME WALDEN

Seventy-five years ago, a small group of Jewish Rhode Islanders gathered in Providence with a simple but profound goal: to preserve the history of Jewish life in the state before it disappeared from memory.

On Feb. 12, 1953, the incorporators of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association held their first formal meeting, marking the beginning of an effort that would grow into one of the most important guardians of Jewish heritage in New England. In fact, RIJHA is the oldest continuously running Jewish historical society in the nation!

Those early founders understood something essential about history: The story of a community cannot be reconstructed from memory alone. Jewish history must be preserved in documents, letters, synagogue records, photographs and personal recollections.

IN THIS ISSUE

RIJHA TURNS 75

HAHN PROJECT
UPDATE

LETTER FROM THE
PRESIDENT

DONATIONS &
UPCOMING EVENTS

The task the founders set for themselves was therefore both scholarly and communal: to collect the scattered fragments of Rhode Island's Jewish past and ensure that they would be available to future generations.

Jewish Rhode



Incorporators of RIJHA, left to right: Beryl Segal, David C. Adelman, Alter Boyman, Rabbi William G. Braude, Israel J. Kapstein, Matilda J. Pincus and Arthur Levy.

Islanders helped build the civic, cultural and religious life of the state. From the earliest Sephardic settlers in Newport to the immigrant families that reshaped Providence in the 19th and 20th centuries, preserving their stories has meant preserving a vital part of R.I.'s broader history.

Today, 75 years after its founding, the work begun at that first meeting continues. Through the decades, RIJHA's archive has grown, publications and programs have multiplied, and countless individuals have contributed to the preservation of family histories, congregational records and community memory.

The founders who incorporated this organization in 1951 could not have known how far their effort would reach. What they did know was that history, once lost, cannot easily be recovered.

Thanks to their foresight, the story of Jewish Rhode Island continues to be preserved through the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association.

Hahn project moves into second phase

Over the past year, RIJHA has made great progress in bringing “A Memorial Legacy: The Hahns of Providence” to the community and the state.

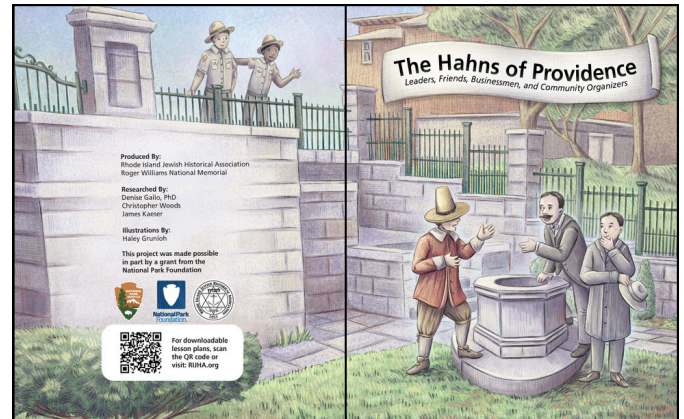
With the publication of “The Hahns of Providence” booklet, the first phase of the project is now complete. The booklet, designed for fourth-graders, tells the story of the Hahn family and their lasting impact on Providence and the Jewish community.

In 1891, Jerome Hahn became the second Jew in Rhode Island to pass the bar examination. He went on to serve on the state Supreme Court from 1931 to 1935.

In 1928, Judge Hahn purchased and donated the land and well that is now called the Roger Williams Spring Park and Hahn Memorial, in the Roger Williams National Memorial, in Providence.

The second phase of the project, now underway, focuses on sharing the Hahns’ story with the public, especially younger audiences. A LEGO replica of the Roger Williams National Memorial will be built as part of the project, creating a visually engaging way to connect with the site and its history. In addition, RIJHA will be developing an interactive digital storybook based on the booklet. The storybook will include animations that help bring the Hahn family’s story to life.

Once completed, the LEGO model and interactive storybook will travel to libraries and museums throughout the state, allowing Rhode



The back and front cover of “The Hahns of Providence” booklet.

Islanders to learn about the Hahn family’s contributions to Rhode Island’s history.

Copies of “The Hahns of Providence” are now available, for free, at the RIJHA office, in the Dwares Jewish Community Center, 401 Elmgrove Ave., Providence.

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Letter from the president

Dear members,

While I was in the middle of writing what is my final letter as your president, I received some wonderful news from our Strategic Planning Committee.

The members have been working diligently since last fall to produce a report on the future of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association. They met a number of times, designed a survey and sent it to members. They then interviewed board members and produced a working draft, which will be presented to our board at its next meeting, on April 9.

After the board members' input, a report will be created as a roadmap for RIJHA's future. (I am holding off on divulging the details until board members see the working draft.)

A hearty thank you to the board members who eagerly volunteered for the committee to undertake this project: Harold Foster, our immediate past president; David Bazar, our first vice president and the incoming president; Bob Kemp, who had been a part of a similar undertaking at his temple; and Larry Ginsberg, who found his new "friend," ChatGPT, useful in assembling the rough draft.

My final message to our members as the outgoing president is a reminder of RIJHA's mission:

"To procure, collect, and preserve books, records, pamphlets, letters, manuscripts, prints,

photographs, paintings, and any other historical material relating to the history of the Jews of R.I.; to encourage and promote the study of such history by lectures and otherwise; and to publish and diffuse information as to such history."

Once we have collected and preserved our archival materials, what are they used for? Genealogists, writers and families use our archive for information for newspaper, magazine and online articles, speeches, books and personal histories.

In addition, objects and documents from the archive are frequently displayed in our office and other venues, and are used to enhance programs by our organization and others, thus fulfilling the last part of our mission, "to publish and diffuse information."

Without RIJHA, and without a board of directors dedicated to preserving and promoting the materials in the archive, there might not be any tangible memories of Rhode Island Jews, their struggles to assimilate, their accomplishments, and their individual and collective contributions to our communities.

Thank you for allowing me to serve as your president. I am excited about RIJHA's future.

Linda Lotridge Levin

President

Upcoming RIJHA Event

“THE WORLD THAT MADE JUDAH TOURO”

A free presentation by
R.I. Historian Laureate Keith Stokes

Sunday, April 26, 11 a.m.
Dwares JCC

401 Elmgrove Ave., Providence

As we honor the 250th anniversary of
America’s founding, we will remember the
extraordinary contributions of early Jewish
patriots through the lives of the Touro and
Hays families in Colonial Newport.

For more information and to register, scan
the QR code or go to our website,
rijha.org/events.



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